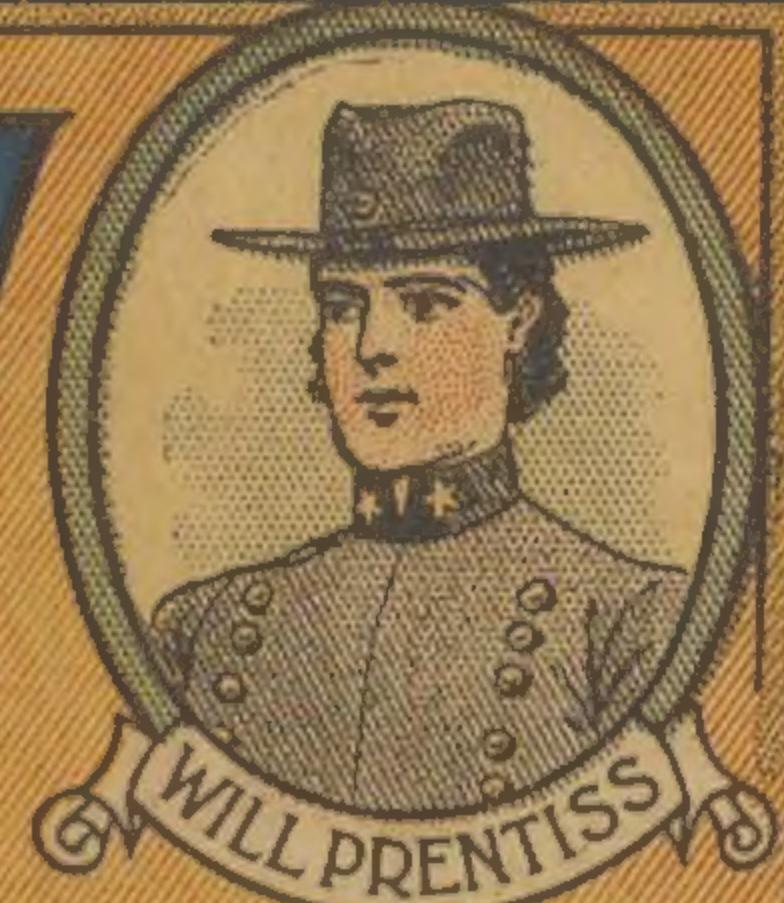




JACK CLARK.



WILL PRENTISS.

BLUE AND GRAY WEEKLY

Stories of Brave Northern and Southern Boys in the Civil War.

Issued Weekly—By Subscription \$2.50 per year. Entered according to Act of Congress in the year 1904 by Frank Tousey, 24 Union Square, New York.

No. 30.

NEW YORK, MARCH 3, 1905.

Price 5 Cents.

STANDING THEIR GROUND; OR, THE BOYS IN GRAY'S STUBBORN FIGHT.

By LIEUT HARRY LEE.



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A desperate fight ensued. The Virginia Grays had arrived upon the scene no
your ground, boys!" shouted Will Prentiss, as, sword in hand, he fought his

lance Randolph. "What have

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CHAPTER I.

A COWARDLY GAME.

Crack!

The sharp report of a Springfield rifle smote upon the air. A dull cry of agony went up, and a voice shouted:

"Look out, Fred Randolph! They've winged poor Morton. Get to cover at once!"

"All right, Captain Prentiss."

The boys, dressed in uniforms of Confederate gray, reined their horses out of the narrow road into a clump of trees. They were not a moment too soon.

The bullets hissed spitefully over the spot where they had been. Down the road went a riderless horse. In the dusty road lay the inanimate form of a Confederate private.

The two young Confederates who had so narrowly escaped the bullets of the foe were officers of a company of Richmond youths known as the Virginia Grays.

The young captain, Will Prentiss, and the first lieutenant, Fred Randolph, who was with him, were out on a reconnoitering tour, with one private soldier as guard, the one now lying dead in the road.

The hour was just before noon. The time was the summer of 1862, when Lee started on his Maryland invasion. The place was a highway near the Maryland line.

The Virginia Grays were a part of Jackson's advance guard, and at present were on scout duty in advance of the column.

Without an instant's warning, the two young officers had ridden into the range of masked entrenchments beside the road.

"Hang it all! It's too bad about Morton," said Will Prentiss, regretfully. "He was one of our best men."

"You are right," agreed Fred Randolph. "I shall have to write his mother, and that is a hard thing to do."

But this was all that the boys could do for the dead soldier.

War was ever thus. A moment's pang at the death of parting comrades, and then a brave facing of the foe, and perhaps, also, death again.

The two young Confederate officers, once in the cover of the trees, put spurs to their horses and dashed away. Bullets pattered among the trees.

But they were not struck.

On they rode, until they came into a cart path. This led them between rail fences into a farm yard.

A farm house stood a little distance away. The two soldier boys pulled rein.

"Hello!" exclaimed Lieutenant Randolph. "What have we here?"

"It looks like the home of a Maryland farmer," continued the lieutenant. "On my word, Will, I am so hungry I could eat anything. Let us see if we cannot get something to assuage our hunger."

"I'm with you, Fred!"

The two boy soldiers rode up to the house and dismounted. They saw no sign of a Union foe about the place, so they felt little fear of trouble.

The Marylanders, while not exactly Southern partisans, at least were not foes. So the boys did not hesitate to approach the house.

Will Prentiss tapped on the door with the hilt of his sword.

It opened, and a shrewd-visaged man appeared on the threshold. He was of most peculiar appearance.

His form was misshapen and bent. His jaw was protruding, and his nose was hooked. His lips parted, showing a row of decayed snags for teeth.

He leered at the two Southern boys and asked:

"What do ye want?"

"Are you the farmer who owns this place?" asked the boy captain.

"I'm Jeremiah Hodgkins," replied the farmer, in a squeaky voice. "This is my humble home. What do ye want here? I hope ye ain't goin' ter burn and destroy, like the most of ye have done. The fair country of Maryland is beginning to look as if a pestilence had struck it, and it's all on account of you fools of soldiers. What's war, anyway? What's ther use of it? Jest to plunder an' kill an' burn. Ther Lord had oughter rise up in his wrath an' sweep ye all offen ther earth."

Will Prentiss started back before the fanatical violence of the old fellow.

"You are partly right, my friend," he said. "War is a great evil. But I don't see how we can evade it. We are in the service, and we think our cause is just."

"In course ye do!" leered the dwarf. "The Old Nick ought to have ye all."

"He will get us fast enough," said the boy captain. "But you're not so bad as you look. If you are a true Marylander you will give us something to eat."

"Oh, that's what ye want, eh? It's a wonder that ye ask fer it, an' that ye don't come right in an' take it."

"We will pay you for what you can give us."

"Will ye?" leered Hodgkins.

"I promise you that."

The farmer opened the door.

"Walk in," he said, in a sinister way. "Ye're welcome to my humble home. I'll give ye ther best I've got."

"Very good," said Will, as he tethered his horse. "That is more like it, Mr. Hodgkins. I will pay you well."

The two young officers walked into the farm house. They saw that it was a neatly kept place, in spite of the rough appearance of its owner.

A negro woman appeared and began to place food on the table.

Jeremiah Hodgkins lighted a pipe and sat down by the fire-place, and leered at the boys persistently.

But Will Prentiss and Fred Randolph were too hungry to think much of anything else. Army rations became monotonous, and it was certainly a treat to smell good home cooking.

The negress seemed neat and capable. The boys smelled intoxicating odors of roast meat and hot bread. It was most appetizing.

"Well, Mr. Hodgkins," said Will, as he made an attempt to be friendly with the farmer, "I think you need have little fear of our boys committing any depredations on your farm. We are driving the Yankees back, and you should regard us as your friends."

A cackling laugh escaped the farmer.

"I dunno," he said. "Ther Yankees have treated us well. We ain't got no fault to find."

Just then the negress brought in a dish of hot stew and placed it on the table.

"I am all ready for the gemmens," she said. "I reckon yo bettah eat."

"With great pleasure," said Fred Randolph, drawing up to the table. "Ah! This seems like the good times before the war, eh, Will? Let's wish Mr. Hodgkins success and much happiness."

"Right!" cried the boy captain. "May he never be deserted by good fortune."

The farmer grinned, but made no response. He seemed to show even more malice than before in his face.

The boys ladled the hot stew into their bowls and were just about to taste it.

But it never passed their lips.

A most astounding thing happened.

The door of an inner room flew open. A stifled scream arose, and both boys sprang to their feet.

What they beheld startled them.

On the threshold stood a young girl, beautiful as a dream. Her appearance was distraught. Her eyes were wild with horror and fixed upon the two young soldiers.

"Oh, do not eat!" she screamed. "You will die! The food is poisoned."

With a yell like that of an animal, Hodgkins bounded across the room and clutched the girl by the shoulders.

He flung her rudely against the wall and tried to reach her fair throat with his fingers.

But Will Prentiss sprang forward and hurled the farmer back. He stood between him and the girl.

"You dark scoundrel!" cried the young captain. "What does this mean?"

"She—she lies!" howled Hodgkins. "I'll kill ther jade!"

"If you attempt to harm her it will be the worse for you!"

Hodgkins had retreated to the door. His contorted face was yellow with fear and hatred.

Will Prentiss turned and faced the young girl. She was still panting with fright.

"Have no fear, miss," he said. "No harm will come to you. I will hang him if he dares to even threaten you."

"Oh, I could not stand it!" she breathed, heavily. "I

am a Northern girl, and I want to see the Union win, but I could not see you foully poisoned."

"Then, it was intended to poison us?"

"Yes, oh, yes! The soup is poisoned."

Will Prentiss' face grew hard.

"Pardon me," he said. "I cannot believe you are this old scoundrel's daughter."

"No, oh, no!" she replied. "My father is Colonel Clair, of the Union army. He was wounded a few days ago and brought here. He is in bed, dangerously ill, in an inner room. Oh, I beg of you not to make him a prisoner."

"My dear young woman, calm yourself," said Will. "We do not capture or harm wounded men."

"Oh, I thank you. I knew by your looks that you were honorable men. I heard him tell the negress to put a poison powder in your soup. He is loyal to our cause, but we do not fight a foe in such a cowardly manner."

Hodgkins had slipped from the room. Will Prentiss saw this and, turning to Fred, said:

"See that he does not get away. It will be well to hold him a prisoner."

The young lieutenant went out after the farmer. Will now bowed respectfully to the young girl, and said:

"I would like very much to see your father, miss. Will he grant me an interview?"

"I am sure he would be glad to see you," replied Mabel Clair, with a shy smile. "I will lead you to his room."

Will Prentiss followed the young Northern girl through the door into an inner room. Here, on a couch, lay the figure of a man of fine face and military bearing.

But there was an ashen pallor and a sinking of the cheeks, which told the boy captain, as soon as he saw him, that he was even at that moment at the threshold of death.

"Father," said the young girl, softly, "a Confederate officer has come to see you. He has promised to—" and she gave a little gasping cry and bent down over him.

CHAPTER II.

SURROUNDED.

Colonel Clair had opened his mouth to speak, but was unable to articulate. It was easy for the young girl to see that a change had come.

Grief and fear were blended in that one cry as she bent down.

"Oh, father—my dear father! I cannot give you up! Oh, God will not take you from me!"

Will Prentiss took a flask of brandy from his pocket and applied it to the lips of the dying man.

But it was too late.

The death rattle sounded in his throat. His jaw fell and his figure stiffened. His brave spirit had fled.

Reverently the young Confederate stepped back and left the grief-stricken young girl with her dead.

Will Prentiss passed into the other room. The soup served by the negress was yet on the table.

Its savory odor tempted his nostrils. But he dared not taste it. He passed into the kitchen of the farm house. The negress had fled.

Just then Fred Randolph came in.

"It's no use, Will," he said. "Hodgkins has given me the slip."

"Too bad! He is a bad one. I wish we could have got him."

"What a fiendish trick that was, trying to poison us!"

"Indeed, yes!"

"Where is the girl who saved us?"

Will then told of the death of Colonel Clair in the inner room. Fred listened with horror.

Just then a footstep caused both to turn. Mabel Clair was before them.

"Captain Prentiss," she said, "I fear you are incurring great risk in remaining here. I would advise you to leave this place as soon as you can."

"Miss Clair," said Will, lifting his hat in salute, "what are your plans?"

"I—I don't know. I shall try and go back to the North."

"We shall be pleased to offer you the protection of our camp, and a safe escort, later, to the Union lines."

She hesitated. There was something pitifully helpless in her manner, as she said:

"Oh, I feel that I can trust you."

The two young Confederates found spades in the farmhouse and proceeded to dig a grave in the yard outside. The dead body of the colonel was laid tenderly into this and buried.

Mabel Clair knelt for a time in prayer over the grave. Then she turned to Will and Fred, and said:

"I am ready to go with you."

The two young Confederate officers turned to find their horses. It was Will's purpose to offer Miss Clair his horse.

But just then a startling thing happened. Fred first caught sight of a blue uniform in the shrubbery.

Then a loud voice called:

"Surrender, you Confederate dogs!"

"Fred," cried Will, "take Miss Clair and mount. I will hold them at bay as long as I can."

"Never!" cried the young lieutenant. "I'll not leave you."

"It is the cowardly work of Hodgkins!" cried Mabel. "He has carried the word to the Union regiments encamped below here. I fear you will be captured."

The two young Confederate officers did not relish the idea of capture.

Had the young girl not been with them, they would have mounted and made a dash for liberty. But they knew that it would not be safe to leave her within reach of Hodgkins' malign purposes.

Will Prentiss acted upon sudden impulse. This was to retreat instantly to the house.

On all sides the Union soldiers were now closing in. But it suddenly became apparent to Will that they were not of the regular army, but of the guerilla class.

This added greatly to the boy captain's alarm. To fall into their hands would be a serious matter.

They got into the farm house none too soon.

Bullets shattered the panels in the door. Once inside, the two boys seized their pistols and opened fire.

Will hauled a heavy piece of furniture up against the door. For some moments matters looked desperate, indeed.

The boys kept up as hot a fire as they could. But the guerillas came on and sprang upon the porch.

They hurled themselves against the door. Several of them plunged in through the windows.

Will and Fred, now that their pistols were of no use, met them with their swords. A fierce hand-to-hand conflict ensued.

The boys were hard pressed. It seemed as if they must be cut down.

And, while they were in the thickest of it, they heard a wild, feminine scream. It was Mabel Clair's voice.

She could not be seen, but the boys fought madly to reach the inner room, from whence her cry for help had come.

They could not do it, however. It seemed as if they must certainly yield, when a startling sound was heard outside.

A crash of musketry was followed by a ringing cheer.

In an instant the two young Confederate officers knew what it meant.

"Will," cried Fred Randolph, with wild joy, "it is the Grays. They have come just in time!"

The guerillas retreated from the house in wild confusion. Will and Fred forced their way out, to see the gray uniforms of their comrades coming into the yard.

In command of the little company was Second Lieutenant Dick Walton. In another moment he was shaking hands with the two rescued officers.

"I am glad now that I started to look you up," he said. "I feared that you might have got into trouble."

"You came in the nick of time," said Will. "But, see if Miss Clair is not in the house, Fred. If harm has come to her I will hunt that Hodgkins down and hang him."

Fred at once caused the house to be searched. But the result was most startling.

Not a trace of the young girl could be found. The appalling conviction was forced upon the boys that Hodgkins and his gang had carried her off.

So the Virginia Grays marched away from the place.

In a short while they were deployed across the country in an irregular line. Scouts were sent out to beat up the region for a clew as to the whereabouts of the guerillas.

But not a trace of them could be found. It was a most discouraging reflection.

Will Prentiss had the gravest of fears for the safety of the young girl prisoner. He knew that Hodgkins was vengeful enough to kill her.

The day now began to wane. Nightfall was at hand.

No word had been received for some time from the main army. There might have been a battle fought and a great victory or a defeat for aught Will Prentiss and his boys knew.

"I tell you, Fred," said the boy captain, "I think we

ought to at once get back into communication with our army. I must let General Jackson know where we are."

"All right, captain," said Lieutenant Randolph. "Give me two men, and I'll try to find my way back to headquarters and make a report."

"All right, Fred. You shall have the men."

Sergeant Spotswood and Private Harry Dunn were commissioned to accompany Fred on this hazardous expedition.

For the expedition was as hazardous as it was necessary.

It would not be safe for the Grays to continue further without knowing where the army was. They might at any moment be surrounded and annihilated. They might walk unsuspectingly into the enemy's very camp.

So Fred quickly got ready. They mounted horses and rode away. In the meantime Will Prentiss decided to camp where they were and wait for his young lieutenant's return.

So the Grays were ordered to bivouac in a little hollow among the trees. Here they made themselves as comfortable as possible.

Entrenchments were hastily thrown up to guard against an attack. A heavy picket line was established.

And here the Grays were to remain for some hours. Will Prentiss reckoned that his lieutenant ought to make the Confederate lines before morning.

Scouts reported that there were no signs of an enemy anywhere in the vicinity. So the Grays felt fairly secure.

But, had they known the truth, they might not have felt so much at ease. Not two miles distant was the powerful advance guard of the Union army.

They were bound to resist the advance of Lee with all their might. Even at that moment their scouts had located the little company of Grays, and a regiment was hastening forward to endeavor to accomplish their capture.

What the result of this was we shall see later.

CHAPTER III.

A CLEVER RUSE.

Fred Randolph and his two companions were soon on the road. They left their comrades behind rapidly.

Fred knew the necessity of getting as far on his journey as possible before darkness should come.

So he urged his horse to do its best.

Sergeant Spotswood was a jolly, good-natured fellow. He was as brave as he was jolly. Fred knew he could not have selected a better companion.

For some while they rode on in silence. Then they turned into a road which led through the edge of the swamp.

Suddenly it brought them to a bridge of logs which crossed a creek. Here the wily young officer pulled up.

He knew that bridges were points that were often kept under guard. The Union army, in its advance, would hardly hesitate to establish a guard at such a point as this.

Fred had no intention of riding into a trap.

So he pulled up and said:

"I think we will investigate a little here. Hello! What's that?"

It was seen that his action had been most wise. The

flash of bayonets was seen, and a blue uniform appeared among the trees.

"There's more than one," said Private Harry Dunn.

"Hang it!" said Fred, impatiently. "This delays us greatly. We have got to get across the creek some way or other."

"I have a plan," said Joe.

"What?"

"Let us go down the creek a ways and ford it."

Fred saw that this would be feasible. But he knew that it involved a delay. It would be much more to his liking to outwit the guard.

But how could this be done?

That was a question.

The young lieutenant cast about him for a moment, and then grasped at what he believed was a clever scheme.

He dismounted at once.

"Hold my horse, Dunn," he said. "I will return in three minutes. If I do not return in that time you will know that I shall not come back."

The young lieutenant struck out through the undergrowth up the creek. He crept on until he had reached the water's edge.

Then quickly he stripped and slid into the water.

Fred was a capital swimmer. He knew that the shadows on the water next the bank would screen him.

He let himself glide along with the current toward the bridge. Then he gently swam under it and clung to one of the supports.

He was in complete shadow. He heard the footsteps of the sentinel on the planking overhead.

Crossing the stream by silently swimming, he reached the opposite abutment. He heard the voices of the guard. There were six of them.

What Fred wanted to learn was if they were simply an outpost or a picket. If the latter, he could reckon safely that the Union army was not far away.

He swung himself up on the abutment. He peered over the edge, and saw the Union soldiers in various attitudes of ease but a few yards away.

Every word they uttered was plainly to be distinguished.

"I'm getting sick of army life," said one of the guard. "I left a good home to come down here and starve. If Abe Lincoln expects us to fight for freedom he must give us more to eat."

"I'm with ye there, Bill Blunt," cried another of the guard. "My stomach's empty all the time. The last batch ofhardtack I got would have made good paving stone."

"When this cruel war is over," sang another member of the gang.

"I'm thinking every night when I go to bed of mother's huckleberry pies," said the fourth guard. "I think I'm eatin' one, and ther wakin' up is awful!"

"Humph! Like enough, when ye was home ye'd turn up yer nose at 'em half the time."

"My mother could make huckleberry pies that would win the medal at a cookin' show."

"Bah! You oughter see the pork pie my mother could make."

"Pork pie! Great Caesar! No wonder you're a hog, Blunt, if your mother fed you on pork pie."

"Look a-here, Hickey! Don't you go for to insult my mother!"

"Blunt, it's jest a joke, that's all. Here we're all blowin' about our dear mothers at home, an' not a one of us half appreciated her when we was at home."

Fred thought this was philosophy; but he could not say so.

The subject was to him of no value. But another matter was.

His keen eye did not desert him. He saw that the Union soldiers had stacked their muskets just against the bridge rail over his head.

It had never occurred to them that they could possibly be otherwise than safe. They could, at a single bound, recover them.

But not one of them at that moment was gazing in that direction.

Fred also saw that the muskets were the only weapons they had. Not being cavalrymen, they did not carry pistols.

A daring idea seized the young lieutenant.

With Fred, to think was to act.

He reached up cautiously and seized the butt of one of the muskets. Quick as a flash it disappeared.

With a noiseless movement he slid it into the creek's current.

Another one of the muskets went the same way. Only four of them were left.

Just then one of the guards yawned and said:

"Well, I've got to reconnoiter down the road a bit. I'll git my musket—"

"Oh, hold on, Davis!" cried the other. "Don't be in a hurry. You've got plenty of time. Let's have a game of chuck-a-luck!"

The dice rattled in the speaker's hand. The gambling spirit of the soldier was at once touched. So he said:

"Wall, shake her up!"

It was a close call. Fred knew that the absence of the muskets would have been discovered and an investigation made. The young lieutenant's game would have been spoiled.

But, as the fellow began to stake his money on the dice the attention of the guard was completely absorbed.

One after another of the muskets now disappeared. Fred now stepped up on to the bridge boldly, and, cocking the remaining musket, leveled it at the guard.

He forgot in his excitement the fact that he was naked.

It was a comical situation. Fred aimed the musket and called out, sternly:

"Hands up! You are prisoners!"

The result was astounding. The Union guard bounded to their feet as if a bomb had been exploded in their midst. But what they beheld was to them not only amazing but uncanny.

The naked figure of the young lieutenant in the dim light

took on a ghostly appearance to them. What weird apparition in the flesh could this be?

How should a real ghost be but absolutely clotheless? Surely no human being would steal upon them in such a condition.

The soldiers were none of them boys of superior education. All were more or less victims of superstitious fancy.

So it was comparatively easy for their distorted fancy to see in the naked figure of Fred Randolph only a disembodied spirit.

A yell of terrible fear went up.

"Hey! Lord save us, lads! It's ther ghost of ther Johnny I killed at Bethel."

"Git out, boys!"

"Run! Run for yer lives!"

"It's a ghost!"

And, like a flock of frightened sheep, they skurried away into the woods. It was safe to guess that not one of them ceased running until he had covered a mile.

For a moment Fred Randolph was too surprised to act.

He could have fired after them, but he did not do so. When the real truth dawned upon him the comical aspect appealed to him, and he leaned over the bridge railing and roared with laughter.

"Hello, Joe!" he shouted, finally. "Come on, both of you! It's all right! I've scared the life out of the guard. Work sharp now, and we'll get away before they return."

Spotswood and Dunn now came riding across the bridge.

As they beheld Fred and comprehended the situation they yielded to the humor of the thing, and gave way to uproarious mirth.

Fred hurried away.

He was quickly dressed and back. He at once sprang into his saddle. The three young Confederates dashed away.

They had outwitted the guard and passed the bridge certainly in a most unique, though successful fashion.

But now, when a goodly distance from the bridge, Fred drew rein again. They had now come out of the woods.

To the right, far across a level plain, they saw the gleam of camp fires.

For a moment Fred was in a quandary. They might be the fires of the Union camp, or they might be those of Jackson's army.

How were they to ascertain?

Private Dunn volunteered to dismount and go forward to the picket line.

This he did, while Fred and Joe waited. Twenty minutes later Dunn returned.

"It's all right, boys!" he said, with exuberance. "It's Jackson's right wing, and we can soon make a report to him at his headquarters."

CHAPTER IV.

A WILD RIDE.

Will Prentiss could only await anxiously the return of the little detachment of three which he had sent to headquarters for orders.

The boy captain felt sure that they were not far from the Union lines. It was necessary to use great caution.

So, as darkness settled down, he took the precaution to post pickets and also to send out scouts.

The Grays quickly made a comfortable camp, and settled down to spend the night with ease.

The weather was balmy, and they could sleep finely rolled up in their blankets.

All went well until about ten o'clock, when a scout named Barton came in with a startling report.

"A company of Union soldiers is moving down this way," he said. "To the north of us a full regiment is doing the same."

"Ah!" exclaimed Will, with tingling veins. "You think it possible that they have learned of our presence here?"

"It looks that way, sir."

"And they are coming to make a surprise attack?"

"Just so, sir."

"Well," said the boy captain, with spirit, "that is a contingency we must meet. And I think we can do it."

At once he gave the order to the Grays to fall in. They sprang up, and in a jiffy they had rolled up their blankets and fallen into line.

Quickly Will led the Grays back through the woods. He marched them back over half a mile, and into the cover of a dense growth of pines.

Here, silently in the shadows, they were ordered to stack arms.

Conversation above a whisper was forbidden. No camp fires were lighted. All was quiet.

But half a dozen of the boys had remained behind to keep the camp fires burning.

Pickets were stationed some distance in the woods to give warning of the approach of the foe. This warning was to be given in a clever fashion.

It was easy for any of the boys to imitate the whistle of a nightbird. They were to hide themselves in the tree-tops, so as to avoid capture.

The signal, once heard by Will and the boys at the camp fires, they would retire and watch the surprise attack, which would, indeed, be a surprise.

Time passed rapidly, and suddenly the picket's warning cry was heard. Then Will gave the order to fall back.

Will ordered the pickets to the rear. Then he waited only long enough to see the Union attacking line rush in among the camp fires. He saw that they were surprised, as well as angered, by their failure to capture the Grays.

Then Will started back as fast as he could to the spot where he had left the Grays. It had certainly been a narrow escape.

In their present hiding place, though, they felt comparatively safe. But it was not long before a picket came stealing in, reporting the fact that a line of Union soldiers was marching along the highway below.

Will Prentiss crept down cautiously, and saw that this was the truth.

"Let them go on," he said. "We can do nothing until daylight."

But, despite all, the young captain felt a bit worried. He feared that he had inadvertently marched too far into the enemy's country and that he was already included in their lines.

In this case, discovery meant capture.

However, nothing could be done but to wait. It was an anxious time for the Grays. In their covert they could hear the tramp of marching feet below them.

For what seemed over an hour, the Union forces marched by. Then it became certain to the boy captain that the Union army was making a change of base.

What it could be, he could only guess. He knew that Jackson was pushing the foe back all the while.

It was possible that they were endeavoring to make a flank movement. In any event, Will decided that his best and safest plan was to lay low.

But, when the Union force had passed and all grew quiet again, the boy captain, who was unable to sleep, called his second lieutenant, and said:

"Dick Walton, I want you to remain in command until I return."

"Very well, captain."

Will hesitated a moment.

"I do not anticipate that anything will happen to me," he said; "but, if I do not return by daylight, you may know that there is an excellent reason for it. Try and make your way back to our lines the best way you can."

The young lieutenant bowed.

Will had great confidence in his second lieutenant. It was not the first time that he had left the Grays in his charge.

The boy captain had conceived a daring plan. This was to, if possible, learn the present movements of the Union forces in the vicinity.

Incidentally, he would also try to learn the fate of Mabel Clair. He felt sure that the guerillas, in whose hands she was, could not be many miles away.

She might not be alive.

But it was his belief that she was still a prisoner in the hands of her captors. To rescue her would be a brave project.

Will's purpose was to return by daybreak. He intended going alone, as he deemed it the safest.

Furthermore, he decided to adopt the clever subterfuge of a disguise.

Will had many times found it expedient to play the part of a spy.

For this purpose he had a number of clever make-ups. Sometimes he masqueraded as a Union soldier, at other times as a native farmer or laborer.

He had met with success in the past. He could see no reason why he should fail in the present case.

Now he decided to make up as a type of straggler, or bushwhacker.

He knew the danger of this make-up if he should be captured by the regular soldiers of either army.

But among the guerillas he could have no better card of eligibility.

So he perfected a clever make-up with such materials as he had and by the light of a pocket lantern.

The young captain quickly passed out of the camp.

He was soon making his way around the hillside to strike a northerly course toward the Union lines.

He believed that Watson's guerillas were located somewhere in the intervening region. It was usual for guerillas to operate, either in the rear of an army, or between the lines.

So Will Prentiss walked rapidly on in the darkness, keeping a sharp lookout. He knew that in his present make-up it would be dangerous to fall into the hands of even his Confederate friends.

But the young captain had not covered a great distance when a curious thing happened.

There was a rustling in the bushes by the roadside.

In an instant Will sank down into the gloom. He was sure that some one was approaching.

There was a clicking sound on the gravel. Then a huge form loomed up above. There was a wild snort and the clatter of hoofs.

Will sprang up.

Outlined against the sky he had seen the figure of a riderless horse. The animal had scented him and bolted.

But, as the horse dashed into the bushes the reins became entangled in the branches, and pulled him up short.

In an instant Will sprang forward and captured the animal. He discovered at once that it was a high-mettled steed.

With difficulty he was able to curb the animal. Leading it out into the open, he saw that it had on its back a handsome saddle.

It was evidently the steed of some Union officer, who had either been shot, or perhaps thrown. In any event, riding was better than walking, so Will sprang into the saddle.

He then discovered that there was something bulky in the saddle-bags. The holsters held pistols.

But, before he could investigate further, the horse began to rear and plunge.

Will was a fine horseman, and knew the art of riding.

But he speedily discovered that he had caught a tartar. The animal he bestrode was a wild one.

In vain he tried to subdue the brute. At length, finding that he could not throw him, the horse lowered his head, caught the bits, and went away like a meteor.

In vain Will pulled and sawed at the bits.

The horse would not be restrained. He ran like a ghost down the pebbly highway.

"Confound the brute!" muttered the young captain. "He'll take me into the Union lines."

In fact, this he seemed certain to do.

It was a source of much satisfaction to the young Confederate captain that he wore the costume of a Union guerilla.

On ran the horse.

He cleared fences and walls, and cut through lanes and across fields. Suddenly he slackened speed.

Will saw a hollow dell, where camp fires blazed. The horse swept past a picket guard, who yelled and fired.

The bullet hissed past Will's right ear. It was a close call.

Down into the camp plunged the horse, and came to a halt right among the camp fires. Men sprang up all around and rushed forward to surround the invader.

And Will Prentiss, who had clung to his mount through all, received a great thrill when he saw that he was in the camp of Watson's guerillas.

CHAPTER V.

WILL HAS SOME EXCITING ADVENTURES.

A more exciting situation could hardly be imagined. The young captain stared about him aghast.

For a moment he deemed himself lost.

Then he remembered that, after all, fate and the riderless horse had performed for him just the very thing he had sought to gain.

He was in the guerilla camp.

It devolved upon him now to play his part well.

And the astute young captain knew well how to do it. He quickly recovered himself and assumed an air of complete sang froid.

The guerillas had swarmed about him in excited amazement.

"Great guns! What d'yer call it, Bill?"

"What's dropped down on ter us?"

"Is it ther Old Harry hisself?"

It was Will's turn to put up a big bluff. So he made a comical gesture with his right arm, and said:

"Howdy, gents! I'm making a mighty onceremonious call, ain't I? But I reckoned I'd be welcome."

At this moment Watson himself, a peppery little rascal with a swash-buckling air, came forward.

"What's all this, boys? What hev ye got hyar?"

"Name it, an' ye kin hev it!"

"I'll bet he stole ther hoss!"

Watson advanced and gazed searchingly at Will. He had little, cruel, black eyes.

"Git down!" he said, tersely.

Will tumbled out of the saddle.

For a moment the guerilla seemed lost in a contemplation of the horse. A covetous light shone in his eyes.

In the firelight he saw the animal's fine, thoroughbred lines. It seemed to the guerilla as if a kind fate had sent him the gift of a very fine horse.

"Great Jehu!" he muttered. "He's a pert lookin' animal."

With this he examined the horse's teeth, lifted his eyelids and stroked his limbs.

"Unsaddle him," he said. "Send him to take the place of old Darby. I reckon he'll jest suit me."

"See here, cap'n," objected the young pseudo bounty-jumper, "ye ain't goin' ter take my hoss, are ye?"

"Your hoss?" snorted the guerilla chief, with withering scorn. "Well, I like that! Whar in ther deuce did ye git a hoss like that? Ye never bought him."

"I found him."

"Oh, that's it, eh? Well, then, he's as much mine as yours."

"I say, cap'n," said one of the guerillas, "there's suthin' in this here saddle-bag."

"Eh?" exclaimed Watson. "What is it? Open it and let's see."

At once the saddle-bag was opened. Its contents gave all a start of surprise.

There was a big bundle rolled up in oiled silk. As Watson slashed this open with his knife, out rolled heaps of new, crisp greenbacks.

They were Uncle Sam's best value, of all denominations. With them was a small book, superscribed:

"Payroll of the Forty-ninth Regiment, U. S. Volunteers. Ten thousand dollars in currency. Ephraim Hardy, Paymaster."

A cry went up from the guerillas, and human greed instantly manifested itself, as the whole gang made a desperate rush forward.

But Watson turned like a tiger:

"Back, ye wolves of Satan!" he hissed, and so frightful was the expression on his face that instinctively the hardened gang of guerillas recoiled. His power over them was supreme.

"I confiscate this here money in ther name of the U. S. Government," he cried, ostentatiously. "Let no man put a hand on it."

Mentally, Will Prentiss reflected that but little of the treasure would ever see the coffers of the government, in spite of Watson's virtuous declaration of honesty.

Angry and scowling, but not daring to dispute, the guerillas stood back. Watson very coolly stuffed the banknotes into the saddle-bag, and then, turning upon Will, demanded:

"Whar did you git this money?"

"I dunno," replied the pseudo straggler. "I didn't know there was any money in the saddle-bags. When I found the hoss I jumped on his back, and he ran away with me and brought me here."

Watson looked intently at Will.

"Is that ther truth?"

"It is."

"Who are you?"

"I'm Ben Stickler, of the Fighting Fourth New York regiment."

"Oh, you are? Where is your regiment?"

"Cut all to pieces at Cedar Mountain. I've been playin' on my own hook ever since."

"I see," said Watson, as if disposed to accept the story. "Then you don't know to whom this hoss belonged?"

"I don't!"

"Don't you reckon it's ther fellow's name that is on the book as paymaster?"

"Maybe so."

"Well, ye're not supposed to know anything more about this. See? Jest come ter my tent with me."

Will Prentiss did not object. In fact, he saw that it was his only and his best move.

He followed Watson to his tent. The guerilla gave him a stool to sit on, and then said, mysteriously:

"How much do you know, Stickler?"

Will affected surprise.

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, I see," said the fellow, with a queer grin. "You don't know anything. Well, I am glad to know that."

Will had really grasped the drift of the guerilla's meaning. But he believed that it would be as well not to let him know this.

So he said:

"I don't keer whose money it was, an' I don't want no part of it, cap'n. I'm only a poor straggler, an' I want a fair show."

Watson was instantly disarmed.

He put a hand on Will's arm and said:

"Thet's all right, pard. I guess ye needn't have any more fears. Stop right here with us, an' I'll make ye a sergeant in my company. Do ye understand?"

Will did understand.

"I reckon I do, cap'n. My lips are all full of glue."

"Jest sit right down, an' I'll have ther quartermaster bring ye in a good uniform. Ther commissary will give ye ther best dinner ye've had for one while. Only, if ye ever say a word about this money or ther hoss I'll hang ye."

Watson hissed the last words vengefully. Will's face did not change in expression.

"Then I'm all safe, cap'n," he said. "You bet I don't want nuthin' better. It's a clean bargain."

A few moments later Will Prentiss was feasting on a rare cut of juicy beef done to a turn by the company's cook. He had hoe cakes and syrup and coffee. It was to him a royal repast.

It was not in the young captain's composition to throw overboard any such opportunity as this.

Fate could not have played him a kinder turn.

He was in the camp of the guerillas, and on terms of the most advantageous sort. It was easy to accomplish his ends and get out safely.

These ends were notably to ascertain the fate of Mabel Clair.

How to do this was a puzzle.

He knew that direct inquiry might excite suspicion. She might at that moment be a captive in one of the guerilla tents.

Just how to find this out was Will's problem. But he was bound to succeed. His keen wits were at work.

He ate his meal leisurely. When it was over he left the tent and appeared in the circle of camp fires.

For some reason, but few of the guerillas were sleeping.

The most of them were grouped about the camp fires. Some were engaged in playing cards or shaking dice, for gambling was the spirit of the camp.

Will Prentiss affected the lounging manner his part demanded, and proceeded to affiliate with the gang. In a

few moments he had been invited to take a hand in one of the games.

The hour was now almost four. It would not be long before the morning light would be streaking the sky.

Will Prentiss indulged in the card game with apparent zest. The stakes were small, so that he was able to hold his own.

And he had no trouble in becoming friends with the guerillas.

He was, however, busy all the while considering a plan to gain the confidence of some of the guerillas. Thus far he had met none whom he felt that he could safely approach.

But fate again played the cards into his hands, so that he was able to accomplish his purpose.

Suddenly he heard angry voices. Turning his head, Will gave a start.

He saw a misshapen figure by the entrance to one of the tents.

He recognized Jeremiah Hodgkins. The farmer was just about to tear open the flap of a tent. An aged negress had sprung out and hurled him back.

"Yo' done git away from heah, yo', no 'count po' white trash!" she screamed. "Yo' ain't gwine to abuse de young missis, not if ole Black Jennie can stop yo'."

"Git out of my way, you nasty wench!" snapped the dwarf.

"Yo' git out ob de way, yo'self!"

Hodgkins, with a smile, drew a wicked looking knife. In an instant Will was upon his feet.

The farmer had made a savage thrust at the negress. A moment more and there might have been a tragedy enacted.

But the pseudo young straggler had cleared the intervening space at a bound. He sprang upon Hodgkins like a panther and hurled him back.

Hodgkins, recovering, rushed at him fiercely.

"You dirty mudsill!" he yelled. "What right hev you ter cross me?"

"The right any man has to baulk a cowardly assassin!" cried Will, with a ringing voice. At that moment he meditated killing the wretch.

Hodgkins aimed a terrible blow at him with the knife. But just at that moment Watson appeared on the scene.

The guerilla chief was white with fury.

"Confound ye, Hodgkins, what are ye doin'?" he roared. "If ye attempt to harm that gal I'll kill ye."

"Dat's right, Mars Watson!" screamed the negress. "He done mean to kill de po' young missy."

"Well, I'll hang him!" roared Watson.

But Hodgkins sheathed his knife. He crept forward, cat-like.

"No, ye won't!" he gritted. "Ye can't harm a hair of my head. I'm too valuable in the Union Secret Service. They'd hang you, if you dared to harm me. But I'll tell ye now that I'll have that treacherous young hussy's life if I live!"

Just then the flap of the tent parted, and all gave a start.

CHAPTER VI.

CLEVER WORK.

In the tent entrance stood Mabel Clair; beautiful as a dream. She was very pale, but fair.

At sight of her Hodgkins drew his knife and began to gnash his teeth like a ravenous wolf. He hated her because she had betrayed his plot to poison Will Prentiss.

Watson straightened up, and a peculiar light came into his eyes. Will Prentiss almost forgot his personality, and was about to speak to her.

But Mabel Clair gazed at Hodgkins in a calm, fearless way.

"You seek my life," she said, in a full, clear voice. "I would tell you that you would win a poor revenge, for life is no longer dear to me."

Hodgkins quivered with murderous rage.

"Ye informed on me!" he gritted.

"Did I?" she asked, quietly. "It was to save a human life."

"The life of a Confederate dog."

"A brave and noble life, just the same," she said. "In the sight of Heaven it would have been cowardly murder."

"Ye're a soft-hearted fool!" he gritted.

"The cause of the Union is not benefited by such as you," said the young girl, impressively. "It is not honorable warfare to put poison in one's food."

Hodgkins snarlingly stepped back.

"You escape now!" he gritted. "But I kin warn ye that yer time will come. Jeremiah Hodgkins will not fail."

The dwarf stepped back and was lost in the gloom. Watson stood a moment irresolute. Then he turned and looked sharply at Will.

"Did ye know him?" he asked.

"Yes," replied Will. "I've seen him afore. I couldn't see him hurt these here wimmen."

"That's right," said Watson, complacently. "Especially as that pooty young gal is likely to become my wife."

Will gave a gasp.

"Your wife?"

"Yes, she may have ther honor. Lucky gal, ain't she? But I've kinder got a weakness for her. If I dared, I'd hang that old bunchback. But he's got too much influence back of him."

"Has she agreed to marry ye?" asked Will.

"Hain't said nothing to her about it yet. Reckon I'll speak ter her termorrer."

"But—what if she refuses?"

"Don't ye fret! She won't refuse me. I've been a pooty good ladies' man in my day. Refuse me? Well, that's funny. I know she's a nifty little hussy: but that would make no difference. What kin she do, if I makes up my mind ter marry her?"

The guerrilla leered at Will. The young Confederate captain shivered.

"Nuthin' at all!" he agreed. "I reckon she'll come to it."

"Wall, you kin bet she will!"

Mabel and her faithful black companion had gone back into the tent. Watson now strode away.

Will Prentiss stood a moment reflective. He had found Mabel Clair. It was now a matter of rescue.

And no time must be lost.

He knew well enough that daylight was near at hand, and then it would be too late.

But how was the rescue to be made? The young Confederate captain, however, did not lack inventive genius.

He was determined to win success.

He now withdrew from the circle of card-players. He strolled around into the shadows behind the tent in which Mabel Clair was confined.

Will was resolved upon a daring expedient.

He must have a talk with the captive girl. She must know of his presence in the camp and his purpose.

So he watched his chance.

At an unobserved moment he sank down in the shadows and crept up behind the tent. The negro woman had gone out on an errand.

Will carefully crept to the wall of the tent and said, in a voice just loud enough to be heard within:

"Miss Clair, have no fear. A friend is here."

There was a movement and a little stifled cry. Then Mabel's voice was heard:

"Who is it?"

"You know me! Captain Prentiss."

"Praise Heaven!" she exclaimed. "Is it true? Can yo rescue me? Can you take me from this place?"

"I shall certainly endeavor to do so."

"Oh, Captain Prentiss! I had given up all hope."

"You need not, Miss Clair! I will certainly save you if all goes well. Can you trust the black woman?"

"I think so!"

"Then, when she returns, tell her that I am here. I shall cut a hole in the rear of the tent. All is shadow here. You will slip through, and we will plan to in some way elude the guard."

"Oh, Captain Prentiss! I pray we may succeed!"

"We will try!"

Then Will crept back and waited. When the negro, Black Jennie, returned some moments elapsed. Then he saw her figure near him in the gloom.

In an instant he was upon his feet.

"Are you waiting for me?" he asked in a low tone.

"Massy, Lordy! Am dat yo', Captain Prentiss?"

"Yes."

"De young Missy done ax me to tolle yo' she an all ready."

"Very good," said Will. "Let her creep down in the shadows to yonder clump of cedars. I will meet you both there. I must first remove one of the picket guards. Then I shall try and get three horses."

"A' right, seh! Yo' kin bet we'll be dun."

"I can trust you, Jennie?"

"Bress yo' soul! Ole Jennie love dat young Missy too well fo' to see her kep' yere any longer."

"All right, Jennie. Now don't fail me."

"Don' yo' hab no fear, sah."

Will slipped away in the gloom. He had two things to do now. One was to remove the picket guard. The other was to secure horses.

Both were difficult undertakings. Upon their accomplishment depended the success of all.

But the young Confederate captain was not the one to flinch.

He stole softly down to the picket line. The guard was pacing his beat when he approached.

Now Will Prentiss had played this sort of game before. He was well provided therefore. In his inner pocket he had a flask of brandy.

Also he carried a tiny phial of a very powerful drug. He dropped a little of this into the brandy.

"Hello, comrade," he said as he approached the picket. "Kinder chilly, eh?"

"Yas," replied the picket; "got any good terbacker?"

"No, I hain't got nuthin' but a leetle good old brandy."

"Brandy! Lord love ye! I hain't had a taste fer a week!"

"Jest put yer lips to that," said the young captain, holding out the flask. The picket took it with avidity. He took a deep pull at it.

"Ah! that goes to yer vitals," he said. "Mighty fine stuff. Thank ye!"

Will now sauntered away toward the corral. A couple of guerillas lounged at the entrance. The corral was made by the stretching of ropes around an enclosure among the trees.

"Hello, boys," he said, "are ye cold?"

"Hey? What's that to you?"

"Nuthin' much, only I've got suthin' here will warm ye up."

"What is it?"

"Oh, a leetle brandy!"

"Brandy?"

The two guards were on their feet in an instant. Their lips were dry.

"Don't ye fool us, comrade."

"Taste of that," said Will.

They applied their lips to the flask in turn. By this time there was little left.

"Much obliged, comrade!"

"O'n, that's all right," said Will.

"Come 'round agin!"

"You bet I will!"

The young Confederate captain boldly set sail for the tent. He found that the negroes and her fair charge had left it. He found them in the clump of cedars.

"The way is clear," he said. "Walk down past the picket. He won't trouble you, for he is asleep. I will come along with the horses in a few moments."

The two females proceeded to obey.

Will now hastened back to the corral. He found the two guards senseless.

Very coolly the young Confederate captain saddled the

horses and mounting one led the other two. He was not seen as he passed beyond the picket line and into the woods.

He heard a faint cry and the two females came into view. Very quickly they were in the saddle.

Then cautiously they rode till they reached the highway. Will here gave his horse rein.

"Come on!" he cried. "The deed is done. We will soon be safe!"

On they galloped. As near as possible Will followed a course which he believed would lead them to the camp of the Grays.

For some time they rode on safely.

Then a startling thing occurred.

From the gloom by the roadside came a trio of mounted men. A sharp cry went up on the air.

"Halt! You are prisoners!"

For a moment Will Prentiss was impelled to use the pistols in his holsters. It was lucky that he did not do so.

Something in the voice struck him as familiar. He called back:

"Hello! That sounds like the voice of Fred Randolph."

"It is," was the reply, "who the deuce are you?"

"Well, if fate has not played some queer pranks tonight," cried Will Prentiss. "Don't you know me?"

"Mother of Mercy! It's Will Prentiss."

"You are right."

"And these women—Great Cæsar! have you rescued Miss Clair?"

"She is here safe and sound!"

It is hardly necessary to say that it was a happy meeting. Fred Randolph and his companions, Spotswood and Private Dunn, had just come from Jackson's headquarters.

Mutual explanations followed.

Will came in for much praise for his daring work. He received it modestly and then asked eagerly:

"But what report do you bring from Jackson?"

"There is desperate work before us," replied Fred. "We are to march two miles to Wolf Cut and hold the railroad there. He says we must stand our ground and make as stubborn a fight as we can until he can send us reinforcements."

"Good! that means that we are to have occupation."

"Yes!"

"I am glad of that. Now that we have rescued Miss Clair and beaten the guerillas it will be exciting to turn our hands to still more arduous work. Let us ride on and rejoin our comrades."

The little party now galloped on. After a time they came to the hillside where the Virginia Grays were encamped.

CHAPTER VII.

AT THE RAILROAD CUT.

It is hardly necessary to say that they were given a rousing reception by the Grays.

The little company cleared itself however. For some time there was much excitement.

But when it was learned that they were to undertake the

arduous duty of the defence of Wolf Cut there was great enthusiasm.

It promised lively work and this was what they wanted.

At once preparations were made for the march to the cut.

The Grays quickly broke camp and fell into line for the four-mile march. The daylight had come.

As Mabel Clair could not well undertake her northern journey just yet it was arranged that she should remain with the Grays while old Aunt Jennie was her faithful servant.

Indeed, the young girl was interested in the military life and though her sympathies were with the North she was nevertheless bound to wish the Grays success.

The march was soon under way and the Grays were in high spirits. The day was perfect.

Down the country highway with buoyant tread went the little company. Four miles is not a long march.

It was long before the noon hour that they sighted the railroad and the deep cut which gave the place a strategic importance.

For up this railroad track, with intent to pass through the cut and attack Jackson's rear, would come a number of Union regiments.

The odds would be tremendously against the little company of Grays.

But advantage of position was theirs. Moreover, as General Jackson had reckoned a showing of force at the cut, no matter how small, would have its effect upon the foe.

Moreover, reinforcements were already on the way and should arrive in a few hours.

So Will Prentiss felt that it was not altogether an impracticable scheme. While it might be desperate it still had fair chances.

When the Grays reached the cut no time was lost.

Swiftly they began work. The whole ridge along the cut was quickly entrenched.

Then scouts were sent down the track. To the northward the track was intact. Reinforcements were expected to arrive by train.

So it was extremely necessary that the cut should be held. Will Prentiss adopted every possible device to make the position one hard to carry.

With axes impromptu chevaux de frise were hastily made to cross the embankment. Those would halt the charging foe long enough to make them a target for deadly volleys.

"We'll give them hot work," declared Joe Spotswood, grimly, as he returned from work on the outer defenses. "They will think they have been to a fight when they get through."

The matter of ammunition, however, had caused Will a little woriment. However, he remembered that he was not required to hold the position alone.

Reinforcements had been promised. Until these could arrive he felt sure of success.

There was nothing to do now but to await the attack. It was sure to come. The Union advance must not pass

around such an obstruction as this and leave so dangerous a foe in their rear.

Suddenly a scout came in breathlessly.

"They are coming!" he declared. "They are but a mile away!"

At once there was excitement. The Grays got into the trenches and were in readiness. They watched the railroad track.

It seemed an age, but finally far down the track they saw the glitter of steel. Then blue uniforms were seen.

The foe was coming.

It was a moment of awful suspense. The Grays did some deep thinking.

They would soon be in battle. Some among them must lose their lives. It was a solemn thought to each man that it might be his turn to die.

It was not fear—but the grim realization of a dread possibility.

Not one in that line of gray would have withdrawn if the chance had offered. All were ready to stand to the last.

"They are a handsome lot of men," cried Joe Spotswood, levelling his glass at them. "But they'll run up against their certain finish this time."

"So they will," declared Fred Randolph. "Remember, Grays, that General Jackson expects us to hold the cut! Let us not disappoint him."

"Hurrah!" cheered the Grays.

But already the foe had got sight of the Confederate defenses. The discovery caused them to halt their advance.

Reconnoitering parties were sent forward. Several of these drew the Confederate fire.

Then the Union troops deployed in a long and powerful line across the railroad. When the Grays saw what a superior force they were there were some misgivings.

But Will Prentiss cheered them.

"Remember, boys," he said, "an intrenched company can cope successfully with a whole regiment devoid of defense."

Just then a flag of truce was seen to be approaching. For a moment there was deep interest in this.

Will went out to meet the truce-bearer.

"We are sent by General Wadleigh," they declared. "He offers you the honors of war if you will surrender."

"Surrender!" cried Will Prentiss, contemptuously. "If you think it necessary for us to do so, attack us."

"Then you will not accept our terms?"

"By no means!"

"I need only say that we shall move at once upon your works."

"Move ahead. We're ready for you."

The truce-bearer departed. A few moments later heavy fire was opened. The foe had not yet brought up its artillery.

The fire was answered only lightly by the Grays. Will's judgment told him that it was only well to fire when there was a mark to shoot at.

"Our hope lies in our ammunition," he said. "If it holds out we can beat them."

But now a long line of men were seen advancing... It was the first line of attack. A handsome spectacle they made.

Along the railroad they deployed. A hot fire swept the Grays' trenches.

But yet Will did not give the order to return the fire.

"Wait," he said grimly. "It is not yet time to fire."

The Union line drew nearer the chevaux de frise. Then with a cheer they made a rush for it.

The obstructions, however, proved stronger than they had fancied. It was the right moment now for the Grays.

"Ready, Grays!" shouted Will Prentiss. "Take aim! Fire!"

The volley of the Grays had a deadly effect. It swept the Union line back. Rapidly the Grays loaded and fired.

The result was that their fire was so hot that the Union line could not hold. They were compelled to fall back.

It seemed like a victory for the Confederate boys. They rose and cheered wildly.

Under ordinary circumstances Will would now have ordered a bayonet charge. But he refrained, from the wisest of reasons.

He knew that the foe were yet by far too strong. It was better for a while to act wholly on the defensive.

So the Grays remained in their trenches.

But the Union commander was not yet disposed to yield the point. Once more the men were rallied to the charge.

Again they came on bravely. To Will Prentiss it seemed a useless slaughter.

Again the Grays concentrated their fire and swept the Union line. Again they were forced back.

This time the foe did not return. They withdrew to a safe distance.

It had become plain to them that to carry the trenches was not going to be so easy a matter after all. The foe in their path was a stubborn one.

"We'll hold our ground, boys," cried Will Prentiss, jubilantly. "How is the ammunition, Lieutenant Randolph?"

"We have yet a plenty," was the reply.

"Good! that is all we need!"

The Union forces now seemed to have abandoned their hopes of at once forcing their way through the cut. They deployed their line and it could be seen that they were bringing up artillery.

It was the first intimation that Will Prentiss had received that they had possessed such a thing. It caused him a chill of apprehension.

"That is bad," he said. "I'm afraid we can't stand before that."

"They can easily shell us out," said Fred Randolph, dismally.

"Oh, well," said the boy captain hopefully, "we won't give up yet. Perhaps our boys may arrive with a battery also."

"I hope they will."

"So do I."

It was now seen that the Union commander was rushing three guns to a little eminence to the right of his line of

attack. As Will noted this a daring idea occurred to him. At once he called Spotswood.

"Joe," he said briskly, "do you see what they are doing over there?"

"I do, captain," replied the orderly sergeant. "They mean to enfilade our trenches."

"A clever plan, surely. But in doing so they have drawn their battery off to one side of their line. This, if I am sure there is no infantry detachment beyond, exposes them to a flank attack and an easy capture of the battery."

"They probably figure that our force is small and we would not be able to send a sufficient number to attack the battery."

"Humph!" said Will, with a shrug of his shoulders. "Rather than remain here and be shelled out of our trenches I would abandon them and risk all in a counter attack."

"Captain, every boy in this company is ready to carry out your orders."

"Then, Joe, I want you to reconnoiter over in that direction. Make sure there is no Union infantry on that side. If there is not we will give the foe a shock such as they little dream of."

The orderly sergeant dashed away. He had been gone but a few moments when a second flag of truce appeared.

Will went out to meet it.

"General Wadleigh sends his compliments," said the truce bearer, "and wishes to say that you are under an enfilading fire from our battery. He asks you to surrender unconditionally, or he will open fire."

Will was reflective a moment.

He knew that his point was to gain time. Spotswood had not yet had time to return from his scouting tour. So he said:

"Ask General Wadleigh if he cannot give us better terms."

The truce-bearer went back.

Five—ten minutes—elapsed and he was seen returning. Will met him.

"General Wadleigh wishes me to say that he can accept only your unconditional surrender."

Will now caught sight of Joe Spotswood returning. At once he said:

"Go back to your general and tell him that we refuse to accept his terms. He can open fire as soon as he pleases, and we will be ready for him."

CHAPTER VIII.

RESCUING THE WAGON TRAIN.

The truce bearer hastened away. Will Prentiss knew there was no time to lose. He turned to meet Spotswood.

The sergeant's face was shining.

"Captain Prentiss," he cried, "I have been around the hill and find that the battery on the north side is absolutely unprotected. Not even a picket guard is there."

Will was astonished.

"That is past belief," he said. "It does not seem possible that such a lack of strategy could exist in those times. General Wadleigh must be grossly careless."

STANDING THEIR GROUND.

"I think he fancies his shell fire will drive us back and we will be routed at once."

"I see. Well, we would be foolish not to seize this advantage."

It could be seen now that the Union line was moving up as if to come again to the attack.

The battery had unlimbered the guns and now a shell went hissing over the trenches.

Very quickly Will Prentiss had called his men to quarters and explained to them in a very few words what was expected of them.

Not a man flinched. All were ready.

"Now is our time," said the boy captain. "Fall back in good order into those cedars below."

The boys left the trenches unseen by the foe. They dropped back into the cedars which screened their move.

The advancing foe were met by no heavy musketry fire. They proceeded to tear down the chevaux de frise.

The battery was sending shells into the trenches with deadly effect. Where the shells exploded great mounds of earth arose. Nothing living could remain there. To the attacking force it seemed that the defenders must be annihilated. The storm of grape and canister which followed the shells was terrific.

As a matter of fact, though, the Grays were far from the spot.

They were hurrying at the double quick through the cedars to flank the battery.

On they ran breathlessly.

All depended upon quick work.

The moment the discovery was made that they had abandoned their trenches all would be too late.

Quickly the Grays forded a little run, then climbed a spur of the eminence and went up in the cover of the rolling clouds of smoke.

The smoke completely hid them until they were within a few yards of the rear of the battery.

The first intimation the gunners had of the rear attack was when they heard the wild cheer of victory and turned to see the gleaming line of bayonets full upon them.

What followed was swift and exciting.

The gunners made a futile effort to turn the guns. They fought for a moment and then were swept away like chaff.

Cheer upon cheer went up as the Grays seized the well stored caissons and now turned the muzzles of the cannon upon their late owners.

It must have been a terrible shock to the Union commander to see that he had lost his battery.

On the other hand, the capture of the battery would enable the Grays to stand their ground. Quickly they shotted the guns.

There were plenty in the company knew how to make use of the artillery. The shells burst in the Union ranks and they broke and fled.

In a few moments they were fleeing in the wildest confusion beyond the railroad track.

The Grays were holding their ground.

Firing ceased when the foe had retreated out of range. Then Will Preston decided to return to their old trenches.

The guns were dragged thither and so posted as to command the railroad cut. Certainly the Grays had cause to feel that they had won a great victory.

The Union forces were far out of range. They seemed to manifest no disposition to renew the attack.

The Grays had just got their guns in position and were ready for a possible attack of the foe when a startling sound came from the distance.

It was the shrill whistle of a locomotive.

All eyes were turned to the southward down that part of the track which had not been destroyed.

The smoke of the oncoming train was to be seen. Then the locomotive burst into view.

"Hurrah," went up the cheer from the little company. "Reinforcements at last!"

"We held them, boys!" cried Fred Randolph. "It's all over!"

A few moments later the relief train rolled up to the crossing and instantly armed men in gray began to swarm from the cars.

Colonel Lester with two thousand men had been sent by Jackson to head off General Wadleigh's rear movement.

Lester himself was soon gripping hands with Will Prentiss.

"I am glad to see you, Prentiss," he cried. "We came as fast as the old locomotive could bring us!"

"I am glad to see you."

"General Jackson was much worried about you. He knew Wadleigh had a vastly superior force and he feared you might be wiped out."

"Well, we had a hot fight."

"You must have. I see you have stood your ground nobly. Where did you get the battery?"

"We captured it!"

"Captured it?" gasped Lester. "Captured it from a force ten times larger than your own?"

"We captured it with the aid of strategy."

"Well, that is wonderful," declared Lester. "It only proves what I have heard about you and your company."

"We tried to do our best," said Will modestly. "We could do no more."

"You have certainly done well."

"Did General Jackson send orders?"

"Oh, yes," said the colonel, drawing a letter from his pocket. "Here they are."

Will took the letter and read it.

"To Captain Will Prentiss: I hope this reaches you safely. I send it by Colonel Lester, who will with his force take charge of the defense at the cut. I want you to at once march south along the Maryland Road and wait for the approach of supply trains from the south. I have word that Watson's guerrillas are likely to attack our wagon trains. If you can catch Watson, hang him. Yours,

"JACKSON, General Commanding."

Will turned to Colonel Lester.

"Do you know what this order is?" he asked.

"Well, in a general way. You are to turn over the command here to me."

"Yes."

"Very well, Captain Prentiss."

Will quickly called his company into line. Then he formally turned over the battery and the intrenchments to Lester.

No time was lost.

The Grays at once set out down the Maryland turnpike. They marched on for several miles.

And suddenly coming to the brow of a hill they looked down upon a plain below and saw a white topped wagon trailing its way across the country.

Will with his glass scanned the region about and this resulted in a most startling discovery.

In a little clump of cedars he saw a band of horsemen. A glance was sufficient to tell him the truth.

They were Watson's guerillas lying in wait for the wagon train.

Will's veins tingled at the sight.

At once the Grays went forward. Will reckoned that they ought to make the spot as soon as the wagon train.

This would be in time to aid the defenders of the train. The Grays realized that a hot fight was before them.

Mabel Clair and old Jennie, the negress, rode in the center of the little company of Grays on horses which had been captured from Watson. Mabel had witnessed the fight at the cut with great interest.

She was bound to admit that Will Prentiss was an officer of the highest class in strategy and military ability. He had certainly accomplished wonderful deeds.

But now the Grays began to advance down the road to thwart Watson's attack she might have been excused for a peculiar sensation of dread and aversion.

The possibility of defeat and of again falling into the hands of the guerilla was a fearful thing to reflect upon.

But Will Prentiss reassured her.

"Have no fear," he said, "I don't think Watson's force can stand before the Grays. We will certainly give him a hard tussle."

Nearer drew the Grays to the spot where the guerillas were in waiting. But Will knew the wagon train must reach there first.

However, he urged the Grays on.

Then a distant volley was heard and a series of fierce yells. The wagon train had been attacked.

"Forward!" cried the boy captain. The Grays with a cheer sprang forward.

A quick burst of musket fire upon the scene. Into the midst of the rebels the Grays charged.

The bandits and train guard were making a desperate attempt to defend the wagons. But they were outnumbered.

A dozen rebels, the Virginia Grays had arrived upon the scene before noon.

"Hold your ground, boys!" shouted Will Prentiss, as sword in hand he fought his way along the line.

The guerillas were evidently taken aback at the sudden appearance of the Grays.

Watson himself could be seen leading his men. For a time it seemed doubtful what the result would be.

But the Grays fought like demons.

They shot down the guerillas and bayoneted them in a mad charge. Dozens of the horses had been killed and some of the wagons had been overturned.

But still the guerillas were unable to accomplish their purpose of the destruction of the train.

The Grays fought them back across the road and into the cedars. Then the bugle sounded the retreat.

Watson and his men with baffled rage mounted their horses and rode away. The fight was over.

The wagon train had been saved.

It was the timely and brave work of the Grays that had done it. The captain of the train, Lew Smith, fairly embraced Will.

"By gosh! I thought we were done for!" he cried. "If you had been ten minutes later every wagon would have been afire."

"I am glad we arrived on time," said Will.

"I only wish we could have captured Watson."

"He ought to be hung! He has done more to harm the Confederacy than any other man of his class."

"He is certainly a bad egg."

"Well, it looks now as if we would be apt to get through safely. We have valuable supplies on this train. To lose them might hinder the advance."

"I will escort you for some distance," said Will. "At least until you have reached a safe spot!"

So the wagon train prepared to move on. Fresh horses were brought up to take the place of those that had been killed. Then the order to advance was given.

CHAPTER IX.

CAPTURING THE SPIES.

The Grays escorted the wagon train for some distance.

Then Will Prentiss bade adieu to it and turned his men back. He had decided upon a daring plan.

This was to devote the rest of the day to an attempt to head off Watson. He was actuated in this by a peculiar fact.

This was that the guerilla at the present moment was cut off from communication with the Union army. It therefore seemed an easy matter to drive him back and perhaps exterminate him.

Will felt that to do this would be to accomplish a valuable end.

He could conceive of nothing that would give General Jackson greater satisfaction. So he adopted the plan.

He did not do so, however, without a full realization of the enormity of the undertaking.

He knew that Watson was a shrewd and cunning fighter. That he had great resources and that his forces were apt at any moment to be dangerously augmented.

Moreover, as Watson's command was mounted, he was more mobile and could easily change base.

So Will considered all these points gravely. It did not however, change his resolution.

He had not sufficient horse-flesh on hand to at present mount his command. He had thought of sending to General Jackson for horses.

But he knew that this would take much time. Delay was a thing to avoid.

So he decided to go on as he was.

He did not adopt his present plan without first considering the female charge on his hands. He tried to think of some safe way to send them into the Union lines.

But certainly there was no safe way to do so yet.

Mabel, however, bravely said:

"Have no fear for me, Captain Prentiss. My father was a soldier and I am used to camp life. I shall be glad to make myself useful in some way."

"If you can put up with the roughness of it all I shall hope to get you through to your friends later," said Will.

"You may rest assured I can and will," replied the young Northern girl.

So it was arranged that Mabel Clair should still remain with the Grays.

The little company on leaving the wagon train set out across the country. They marched rapidly westward.

It was Will's theory that the guerilla chief would bear to the west and endeavor to hit Jackson's rear. By hovering about his line of communication he might be able to do much damage.

For some miles they marched on.

Then they hit upon a train of exciting incidents. Turning a bend in the highway they came upon a couple of stragglers from the Union army.

The fellows seemed about to run, but the muskets of the Grays covered them and Will shouted:

"Stand where you are! Surrender!"

Seeing that death would be sure should they attempt to escape the two stragglers threw up their hands.

"We surrender!" said one of them. "It's all up, Jerry Cliff! The Johnnies have got us at last."

The other straggler, a fat, genial-looking fellow, ejected a huge quid of tobacco from his mouth and replied:

"Wall, I don't keer if they'll only give us somethin' to eat, Mickey White."

"We certainly won't refuse you that," cried Will as he looked the two prisoners over. "Who are you?"

"I'm Jerry Cliff, Forty-fourth Volunteers."

"I'm Mickey White, Eighteenth New Jersey."

"Where are your comrades?"

The two stragglers made wry faces.

"Ye've got us, captain," said Cliff. "The last I see of 'em was on ther dead run at Cedar Mountain."

"Is that so? Well, then, you are stragglers?"

"That's what we are!"

Fred Randolph, however, who had been surveying the two keenly, now stepped forward. He bent a searching gaze on Cliff.

"I've seen you before," he said.

Cliff affected surprise.

"Kain't say I know you," he said.

"Oh, you don't, eh!"

"No."

"Well, let us see how natural that beard of yours is! You're no straggler or I'll pay treat."

For the first time the fellow changed color. Will Prentiss was astonished.

"What's that, Fred?" he exclaimed. "Do you really know these fellows?"

"I do," replied Fred. "At least this one. I am sure he is Fessenden, the Union spy!"

A sharp cry escaped those who heard this announcement. Fessenden, the spy, was well known as the most adroit of his class in the service.

A large price was on his head.

President Davis of the Confederacy had declared that Fessenden must be captured. The Grays realized their good fortune.

"Ye're wrong, gents," protested the spy. "I'm only a straggler. Give me a fair chance."

"You shall have it," said Will Prentiss in a firm manner. "Is your beard natural?"

"No!" admitted the spy; "I jest wear it bekase I can't grow one, an' I likes the looks of it."

"That's right," chimed in his pal. "I'll swear to that."

"Pull it off!"

The spy hesitated.

But Fred Randolph gave it a quick pull and it came off. The revelation was a startling one.

The fellow who stood before them was possessed of shrewd features and had in the corner of his mouth a wicked scar.

It was Fessenden's face. The scar was one of the identifying marks.

One moment the spy stood white-faced before his captors. Then he made a sudden desperate spring and hurled the guard aside.

Fred Randolph went down as if struck by a cannon ball.

The spy was ten yards away before Will Prentiss recovered sufficiently to cry:

"Don't let him escape! Fire!"

In an instant a half dozen muskets spoke. Fessenden was almost in the cover of the woods when the bullets caught him.

He leaped in the air and fell upon his face. The next moment Mickey White, his companion, tried to dash in an opposite direction. But he was held and pinioned.

"Too bad," said Will as he reached the side of the spy. "He is dead!"

"Well," cried Fred Randolph, "there was no other way. It was better to kill him than to let him escape."

"Yes, of course."

Will felt sure that the two spies were upon some important mission and that they might carry papers of importance.

So he ordered the dead spy searched.

It was a slow and careful task. Every pocket was turned inside out but nothing was found of value.

Finally in the lining of the spy's ragged jacket Will found a crumpled paper. He smoothed it out.

"Will meet you at McDugal's cabin on Red Creek Friday evening. Will there give you the papers and maps of ambush. If all works well and the secret mine does not fail Jackson's whole army will be blown from the face of the earth. Don't fail to be on hand. Yours,

"WHISTLER."

For a moment Will Prentiss felt giddy.

It was not difficult for him to understand all. Fessenden, the spy, was to meet Whistler, a Union cavalry officer and engineer, at McDugal's cabin that night.

He was there to deliver to the spy the plan of a secret mine which had been placed in some part of the road over which Jackson's division must march.

The exploding of this mine might kill thousands. For a moment the young captain of the Grays was pale as death.

"Fred," he said in a low tone, "do you realize how important a capture we have made?"

The young lieutenant looked surprised.

"Well, it is always of importance to capture a spy," he said.

"Ah, but that is not all," said Will. "Just read this."

Fred read the letter. He turned ghostly pale. For a moment the two young officers looked at each other.

"A secret mine! A plot to blow up Jackson and the army!"

"Just so!"

"But—how could it be done?"

"Easy enough. Mine the road over which it is necessary for the army to pass. It could be easily mined for a mile or more with tons of powder strewn along at intervals."

"But—that is horrible! We must send warning to Jackson at once."

"Not yet. The whole plot will fail if we meet Whistler to-night and capture him."

"Ah, that is the game."

"Before we let an inkling of this get out we must get Whistler."

"You are right!"

Mickey White, the other spy, was in a paroxysm of terror. Will tried to draw some facts from him, but failed.

He would say nothing.

"I dunno," he said. "I didn't have anything to do with it. I'm only a straggler. I didn't know he was a spy!"

Of course Will Prentiss knew this was a lie. But he would make no more talk with the fellow. Least of all he had no idea of setting him free.

The Grays dug a grave and placed Fessenden's body in it. Then Will held a consultation as to the next best move.

It was yet some time before darkness would fall.

McDugal's cabin on Red Creek was about two miles distant. Red Creek flowed between hills in a wild region known as the resort of illicit whiskey distillers.

Will's purpose was to wait until the hour named and then keep the appointment with Whistler.

To do this he had decided to wear a disguise. It was not certain that Whistler had ever met Fessenden.

In any case, the Grays would have the cabin surrounded so that Whistler could not escape.

But in the meantime nothing could be done. It was necessary to wait until darkness had shut down.

So the Grays halted and went temporarily into bivouac. Will was undecided whether to send a courier to Jackson or not.

He finally decided not to do so.

The time passed slowly.

To the young officers the suspense was intense. It seemed as if the night would never come.

"On my word, I can hardly wait," said Fred.

"Nor I," agreed Will. "I never saw hours so long."

But finally the dark shadows began to rapidly settle down. When the darkness had become sufficiently dense, the Grays were called into line.

The prisoner, Mickey White, was closely guarded. Then they set out upon their perilous expedition.

The country about McDugal's was wild and rocky. There was no road. Only a rough path through the wilds.

Into this the Grays finally came and wended their way upward through the rock-bound defile.

CHAPTER X.

EXCITING INCIDENTS.

McDugal's cabin sat in a cleft of the rocky hills. McDugal himself was a lawless mountaineer.

His place was the meeting place of wild spirits. Many a dark tragedy had been enacted there.

A light just ahead suddenly showed up. Will halted the Grays. There was no doubt in his mind that this came from McDugal's cabin.

The boy captain knew well the importance of capturing Whistler.

By this alone could the deadly scheme to blow up Jackson's advance guard by means of the secret mines be frustrated. Only through Whistler could these mines be located.

Knowing this Will Prentiss laid his plans accordingly. He did not mean that the wily chief of engineers should escape him.

Mickey White had become suddenly dumb and would volunteer no further information. But Will was not one to long lack an expedient.

He halted the Grays and decided to go forward on a reconnoitering trip. He turned to Fred Randolph and said:

"Spotswood and I will go ahead a short distance and reconnoiter. You will remain here until you hear a signal which will be a sharp whistle."

"Very well," agreed Fred, "your orders will be obeyed."

So the young captain and his plucky orderly sergeant went ahead. They pushed on cautiously along the rough path.

Will Prentiss knew well the perils which beset the path. It was a dangerous region even in time of peace.

But he kept on, pausing at times to listen and make sure the coast was clear. Finally he saw the dim outlines of the cabin before him.

All was silent about the place.

Save for the light it would have been easy to believe it untenanted. Joe Spotswood, who was at Will's elbow, whispered:

"I reckon there's nobody around, captain."

"Don't be too sure," said the boy captain. "We can afford to take no chances."

Very cautiously now they approached the cabin. Suddenly Joe gripped Will's arm.

"Somebody is coming!" he whispered.

In an instant both sank down in the gloom. They had not long to wait. The footsteps were near at hand.

Then a dark figure brushed past them. It advanced to the cabin door, lifted the latch and stood revealed a moment in the light from within.

Will saw the figure of a well-built man in the uniform of a Union officer. He paused one moment on the threshold. His voice was plainly heard.

"Well, Mac, where the deuce is Fessenden? Hasn't he shown up yet?"

"I reckon he hain't, leftenant," was the reply from the interior.

"Confound him! He is always behind time! There's no time to lose!"

Then the door closed as the speaker vanished beyond it. All was very comprehensive to the young Confederate officer.

"There is our man," whispered Will Prentiss. "We must get him."

"Say the word," said Spotswood, laconically. "I'll go in and get him for you."

"Your intentions are good, Joe," said Will, "but I can't afford to take chances on losing you. If I was sure there were no others hereabouts we would risk getting the scoundrel without further help."

"Well," whispered Joe. "What shall we do, Captain Prentiss? Will we bring the Grays up and surround the place?"

"It is a very good plan," declared the boy captain, "but first I want a look into that cabin. Remain here, Joe, and do not move unless I signal you."

"All right, captain."

Will Prentiss crept forward and reached the window of the cabin from which emanated the light.

He peered through the pane and gazed upon a scene which caused him a thrill.

The interior of the cabin was rough and primitive. Rude benches sat along the walls. There was a shake-down bed in the corner. On the rough stone hearth a fire blazed.

On a rude table were whiskey bottles and cards. At this table sat half a dozen of the most lawless ruffians the boy captain had ever seen.

Their card game had been interrupted by the new arrival,

the young officer in Union blue. They were leaning back in their chairs and gazing at him.

McDugal, the leader of these lawless mountain spirits, stood before the fire-place with both hands in his pockets. He was a short, broad-chested fellow and evidently very powerful.

But what claimed the attention of Will Prentiss was a spectacle which was as startling as unexpected.

Against the wall of the cabin stood a tall young officer in Confederate gray. He was handsome and debonair.

To Will Prentiss he was well known. His name was Malcolm Curtis and he was the son of a family high in the history of old Virginia.

His rank was that of lieutenant, and Will knew that he was an attache of General Lee's staff.

Malcolm Curtis was a prisoner. Ropes bound his arms to his body. In turn these ropes bound him to strong iron rings in the wall of the cabin.

Will regarded him a moment with interest and wonderment. Then he became interested in the conversation which ensued.

"Confound Fessenden!" cried Whistler, with a growl. For it was Whistler. "I don't see why Fessenden has not put in an appearance. All is ready for the explosion. But unless Fessenden does his work Jackson may take some other road."

"Fessenden hain't showed up hyer yet," said McDugal. "I dunno whar he kin be. Mebbe some Confederat detachment has captured him."

"Pshaw! that's not likely!"

"An' yet it ain't impossible!"

Whistler walked up and down nervously.

"Confound it! It's bad for me hanging around here. I've a good mind to throw up the whole job!"

"Ye'd be foolish!"

"I might save my neck!"

"Humph! What is thar to fear?" argued McDugal. "Thar kain't none on 'em hunt us out of these 'ere hills, kin thar, boys?"

"Naw! You bet not!" chorused the others.

Whistler turned and fixed his gaze on Malcolm Curtis.

"Well, what about this bit of furniture you've got here?" he asked. "What are you going to do with him?"

McDugal made a deprecatory gesture.

"We leave that to you, sir. Hang him if you say the word!"

Whistler advanced and faced the prisoner. The latter returned his hard gaze.

"You came near spoiling our plan, you do!" hissed Whistler. "What have you got to say for yourself?"

"Only this," replied Lieutenant Curtis in a rigid tone, "I regret that I failed."

"Oh, you do, ch? Just as defiant as ever, I see."

"I am a Confederate soldier! I would be a coward and a traitor if I should err in my duty to my people."

"You're just as clannish as all the rest. Now I could make use of you if you would only be reasonable. We want just such fellows as you to do secret service work. You

could gain any points for us. If you will swear to go into our service I will give you your life."

A cold, pitiless smile appeared on the young lieutenant's face.

"Not if you were to give me a hundred lives," he said.

"You are a fool!"

"It is easy for you to villainize me while I am powerless. It only proves you all the more a coward!"

Whistler glared at the young Confederate officer, then with an imprecation turned away.

"I want you to tame this young cub's spirit," he said sharply to McDugal. "Put up your cards and your whiskey. There is something else to do."

In an instant the gang sprung up. The table was pushed aside and all stood ready for orders. McDugal saluted:

"All right, sir; we are ready for orders."

A malicious light of triumph glittered in the eyes of Whistler. He cast an eye at the heavy beam which ran through the building over their heads.

"Bring a rope!" he said curtly. In an instant one was produced.

"Release the prisoner."

The next moment young Curtis' bonds were released and he stood before the assemblage unbound. But it did not bring freedom for him.

With a giddy glint of batred in his eyes Whistler said:

"Tighten the rope over that beam. I want to hang this young cub up by his thumbs."

Not a muscle in the young lieutenant's face quivered. He cast the rope thrown over the beam and the slip knots rattled to the floor without firing.

The horror of such punishment is absolutely untold. It is a crime which should belong only to the age of the Inquisition and not to modern times.

But the man who gave the order, Whistler, was a fiend. With a gloomy notion he saw the prisoner led beneath the beam.

All the Will Prentiss had viewed with much interest. Now, however, he saw that matters had gone so far that there must be quick interference.

He fastened and blew a shrill whistle.

Up from the gloom came Joe Spotswood. The rattle of accoutrements from the darkness beyond told that the Grays were also coming.

Those in the cabin had heard the whistle.

It caused the villain Whistler to turn with a start and cry:

"What's that? Go out there and see what it means, some of you!"

The door of the cabin flew open and two of the gang sprang out. They ran pell-mell into Will and Spotswood, who knew them sonlessly and shouted:

"Surrender! You cannot escape! The place is surrounded."

With a yell like an infuriated animal Whistler rushed for the doorway of the cabin. As he did so he dashed the oil lamp from the shelf.

It exploded, the scattered flames everywhere. Darkness

was only momentarily gained. But the Virginia Grays now came swarming up about the cabin.

Will Prentiss had tried to get into the cabin and lost hold of his man. But the darkness caused by the extinguishing of the lamp necessarily lost him.

McDugal and his men surrendered at once. But when all was over a startling discovery was made.

Whistler had escaped.

It had not seemed possible that he could get away. But that he had done so was beyond all dispute.

The released prisoner, Malcolm Curtis, was overjoyed at his rescue.

He gripped Will's hand and cried:

"I am glad to see you, Prentiss. I have heard much about you. Indeed, I have had a close call. Only for your timely arrival it would have been bad for me."

"I am glad that we came up as we did. But it seems to me that our failure to get Whistler is a very serious matter."

"So indeed it is," declared Curtis. "Let us pursue him at once."

CHAPTER XI.

AT CEDAR RUN.

It is needless to say that no time was lost. The prisoners were sent to the rear with Mickey White.

Then the Grays prepared to chase the escaping engineer. The cabin was by this time in flames.

The blaze lighted up the vicinity vividly. Will sent his men out in squads with orders to beat the bush thoroughly.

So the Grays were not long at McDugal's cabin. They were quickly engaged in the attempt to overtake Whistler.

But the villain had a good start. Until an early morning hour the futile search was kept up.

Then a consultation was held.

The danger of procrastination was apparent. It would not do to wait longer. Jackson must be notified at once.

So a courier was sent with a warning despatch to the great general warning him of the secret mines. If Jackson would heed this warning and hold his troops back until an investigation could be made the catastrophe might be averted.

In the meantime the importance of locating the mine became apparent to Will. He decided to try the Cedar Run road first and carefully explore it.

McDugal and his companions swore on oath that they knew nothing of the location of the mines.

"I reckon that's no one but Whistler an' Fessenden an' mebbe White knows anything about 'em," he declared, "outside of Whistler's own company."

White would not divulge the secret. So the Grays set out at once for the Cedar Run road.

As they marched on in the early morning light Malcolm Curtis conversed with Will Prentiss.

"No," he declared, "I only knew that there were mines, nothing more. But Whistler feared that I would warn Jackson and prevent the consummation of his plans."

"We must prevent them at any cost," said Will.

"That is right."

Just then Mabel Clair came riding up. The young girl looked exceedingly charming. The rough life of the military camp did not trouble her.

She bowed to Will with a bewitching smile. As Malcolm Curtis gazed upon her he gave a little exclamation:

"My soul! Is that Mabel Clair?" he gasped.

Will looked at him wonderingly.

"Do you know her?" he asked.

"Indeed I do! I met her once in Richmond some years ago. We were but children then. Her father was an officer in the U. S. army."

"Her father is dead."

"Dead?"

"Yes."

"And she—is a prisoner?"

"Only nominally. She will leave us at the first safe opportunity to go back to the North. She is a brave and beautiful girl."

"I mean to speak with her," said Curtis. "I think she will remember me."

Just then Mabel turned her horse and her gaze fell upon the young lieutenant. For an instant their eyes met.

Then she blushed crimson and as Curtis lifted his hat said:

"It is Malcolm Curtis."

"Yes," replied the young officer. "You remember me, do you not?"

"I remember you well," she replied.

"I am glad to see you, Miss Clair. I want to express my deep sympathy for you in your sad affliction."

"I thank you, Lieutenant Curtis."

Then she rode back to rejoin Jennie, the negress. But Curtis drew a deep breath like one who has just come up from a deep dive.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed, "she has developed into a pretty girl, Will Prentiss."

"Yes, she has," replied Will. "If she was only a loyal Southerner I have no doubt some of the boys would be seeking her favor."

"Pshaw! that wouldn't bar me. What does this war amount to after all? We are all brothers. We are all of the same blood. It will soon be over and then we shall be sorry."

"I believe you," agreed Will. "But we are in the service to fight. We must do our duty as common soldiers until peace is declared."

The Grays after an hour's hard march reached the Cedar Run road.

It was along this highway that Jackson was to move northward that day. If the road was mined it was now the province of Will Prentiss to find it out.

The young captain at once detailed his men to make careful examination of the highway. No sign of the enemy was visible anywhere.

It was not until some hours after daybreak that the first clue to the rascally game was found. Then Joe Spotswood

discovered a wire which extended along the ground into a clump of trees nearby.

Here was found a box and in the box was an electric battery. A more complete bit of evidence was not needed.

By following up the wire the complete revelation ensued. Buried in the highway at intervals were kegs of powder all ready to be exploded by the electric spark.

If the mine had been exploded with the marching columns of Jackson over it the loss of life must have been too frightful to contemplate.

But fortunately for the troops it was revealed. Very quickly the mines were unearthed and the powder removed.

"Well, that beats all the Yankee tricks I ever heard of," declared Joe Spotswood.

"That's right," said Corporal Sam Payton, "but it's lucky that it was found out."

"If we ever get hold of that Whistler we'll hang him!"

"Of course."

But Whistler was at that moment beyond reach. The wily scoundrel had eluded his foes.

The courier who had been sent to General Jackson with the warning of the mine now returned. He had a message for Will which read as follows:

"My dear Prentiss: Your note of warning comes in good time. I shall send a company of sappers and engineers over all roads in advance, so that no chances of being blown up shall be possible. Now that I am able to locate you I take occasion to issue the following orders:

"Immediately upon receipt of this I want you to take your company to Cedar Run. On the north side of the run is a Union outpost. Capture it if possible. Several Union spies are in refuge there at the present moment. Get them all if you can. Yours,

JACKSON."

Will Prentiss read this letter with a thrill. He turned to Fred Randolph and said:

"We are ordered to Cedar Run."

"The deuce!" exclaimed the young lieutenant, "that is pretty close to the Union lines."

"Can't help it if it is. The order must be obeyed."

"Certainly. Not a man in the company will flinch, be sure."

So when the orders were given to march ahead toward the Union lines the Grays fell in with a cheer. Malcolm Curtis could have taken his leave now and gone back to General Lee's headquarters. But he said:

"I'm interested in this Cedar Run move, Prentiss. I'm going with you."

Will smiled and said nothing. But in his inner mind it occurred to him that quite another reason was holding the young lieutenant and that a fair girl's face had something to do with this.

The Grays were soon on the march.

It was three miles to Cedar Run. Scattered about through the region were many Confederate outposts.

A number of these were passed. In each case it seemed

a matter of wonderment that the Grays were going out to Cedar Run.

"Why, that's almost into Pope's hands," said the lieutenant of one post. "You will be outside our lines and beyond any chance of reinforcements."

"Do you believe that?" asked Will.

"I know it."

"Well, it is General Jackson's orders."

"He must have been misinformed. It don't seem possible that he would send you to your death."

Will looked at the other a moment.

"Perhaps we are sent to our death on purpose," he said. "It is sometimes necessary to sacrifice men in order to carry out some great move."

"One does not like to know that he is being sacrificed," said the lieutenant.

"If he is a true soldier he will go to that sacrifice without one pang of regret," said Will, proudly. "What nobler death could a soldier ask for?"

The lieutenant shrugged his shoulders.

"That is a matter of opinion," he said.

But Will Prentiss had no thought of questioning the propriety of General Jackson's orders. He must obey.

Soon the Grays drew near Cedar Run. They saw that a stream of considerable width had cut a chasm in the grayish soil of the plain. On the further side of the run were cedars of heavy growth. From these the chasm derived its name.

The Grays paused when they reached the run. Somewhere on the other side was the Union outpost.

Will Prentiss knew well that more victories are gained by strategy than by hard fighting.

It was now his plan to carefully reconnoiter and then locate the enemy's camp. A plan of attack could be evolved later.

So he sent Spotswood and a couple of privates across the run on scout duty. A few miles back on the road Will had sent all the prisoners in charge of a detail to the Confederate camp.

The young captain being now near the Union lines conceived the idea of sending Mabel Clair into the Union camp. Thence she could return north to her friends.

As yet, however, no logical plan had presented itself.

Malcolm Curtis had expressed a keen desire to scout down the run for a distance. So Will had allowed him to do so.

The Grays now could only wait the result of the reconnoitering expeditions. But they rested on their arms and were ready for action at a moment's notice.

It was not long before Spotswood made his return. The orderly sergeant came into camp in a much excited frame of mind.

"I've located them," he declared. "There are two hundred of them, and they have fortified an old stone house at the forks of the road."

Will was interested.

"Two hundred," he said reflectively. "The odds will be a little against us, but we can surprise them."

"Dead easy!" said Joe. "Their guard system is mighty slack. They don't even post pickets."

"Do you mean that?" asked Will.

"I am sure of it. I crept up to within one hundred yards of the stone house and I saw no sign of a picket."

"Humph!" said Fred Randolph. "They can't know of our presence here then?"

"I should say not."

"Then we may consider the game won. Shall we waste further time, captain?"

But Will Prentiss was silent. He was listening intently to a sudden startling sound which had come to his ear. It seemed like the thud of horses' hoofs.

CHAPTER XII.

CAPTURING THE DEFENSES.

Without answering the question put to him, Will Prentiss arose and passed out of the circle. The others looked at him in surprise.

But the next moment explanation came. They also heard the thud of hoofs.

It had seemed faint at first, but now swelled into thunder, so that the ground quivered with its force.

Will Prentiss passed through the cedars to the highway. From his position he could look back down the road for a mile.

The sight he beheld gave him a shock. Union cavalry was visible. A great body of it was dashing up the highway.

It was a thrilling sight. In an instant Will turned back. He reached the camp in a few strides.

He gave quick, sharp orders.

"Get back out of sight, boys!" he shouted. "Make no noise. Lie low in the cedars."

Will Prentiss had no possible means of knowing whether the Union cavalry had been sent to cut him off or not.

If so, then there must be a desperate fight if he would escape. But, if not, it was possible they might pass the Grays undiscovered.

It was a moment of suspense.

Crouching in the cedars, the little company of Grays waited. A few moments later the body of cavalry was in plain view.

At their head rode a sharp-visaged man with long mustache and a dashing air, which bespoke him a true cavalryman.

He held up his hand and called out:

"Halt!"

The cavalry company instantly came to a halt at the brink of the run. The Grays, cowering among the cedars, could see and hear all.

What seemed to be a conference was held. A couple of the cavalrymen went down and forded the stream.

They rode leisurely up the other side, apparently to reconnoiter. They were fully fifteen minutes occupied thus.

All this while they were within a few yards of the Grays. A more thrilling situation could hardly be conceived.

Joe Spotswood and his companions had returned from the further side of the run. But Malcolm Curtis was some distance down the run, and might stumble into the danger on his return.

All these things occurred to Will Prentiss. But he saw that they were things over which he had no control.

It seemed an age to the Grays, lying there under the cedars, before the advance guard of the Union cavalry returned to report. Then they heard the report:

"Colonel Peabody, we rode half a mile beyond the ford and saw no trace of the Confederate company," said the scout.

"That is very strange," said the shrewd-faced colonel. "I can't believe that we have overridden the game. We should have overtaken them before this. Send that fellow Hodgkins up front here."

The next moment, through the lines came a man mounted on a black horse. He did not wear a uniform, and at sight of him Will Prentiss gave a gasp.

"Hodgkins!" he muttered.

It was indeed the treacherous old farmer who had manifested such a hate for Mabel Clair. Hodgkins, leering and repulsive as ever, sat on his horse before the Union colonel.

"I want to know if you are playing us false, Hodgkins," said that officer, sternly. "If I discover that you are, I will hang you to the first tree I find."

"I tell ye they came this way," said the dwarf. "Didn't I hear the orders given? They were coming out to attack the outpost."

"Well, at the present moment they seem to be invisible. Can you explain what that means?"

Hodgkins looked disgruntled and disappointed. He made reply:

"P'raps they crossed the run and may be down somewhere around the outpost, waitin' to attack."

"I don't believe it. I think you are fooling us, Hodgkins."

"No, I swear I'm not," replied the farmer, fervently. "I'm telling ye ther truth."

"All right," said the Union colonel, lifting his rein. "We'll go on a ways further. If we get no further clew we'll come back."

The cavalcade descended slowly to the edge of the stream and crossed. Soon they were on the other side.

"Well!" gasped Fred Randolph, as he sprang up. "What do you think of that? Wasn't it a close enough call?"

"It's the work of that old farmer."

"He means to trap us."

"He pretty nearly did it. Only these heavy cedars saved us from them."

"They are six hundred strong."

"We would be no match at all for them. I think we had better get out of here as quick as we can."

But Will Prentiss held up his hand for silence. Then he said:

"Don't get nervous, boys. Everything will come out all right. Let them cross the run, and we will do the same, and—"

"What?" exclaimed Fred, in surprise. "Do you mean to cross the run after them?"

"Yes."

"Whew! Is that not risky? Didn't their colonel say that they would come back this way?"

"Have no fear," said Will, quietly. "They will never think of looking for us in their rear. We are safer on the other side of the run than here."

There was silence. It was plain that the others did not share the boy captain's theory. But just at that moment Malcolm Curtis came hurriedly into camp.

The young lieutenant was pale and excited.

"Captain Prentiss," he cried, "I have important news for you."

"Well," asked Will, "what is it?"

"Only a mile below here a large force of Union infantry is coming this way. If we remain here they will be sure to stumble on to us."

This was startling news, indeed. It created a sensation.

"I tell you, we will soon be hemmed in," declared Fred Randolph. "Our only hope is to retreat."

A general exclamation of approval went up. But Will Prentiss shook his head.

"Fall in!" he commanded. "We must get across the stream at once!"

For a moment there was hesitation. All looked aghast.

"Pardon me, Captain Prentiss," said Malcolm Curtis, respectfully, "but is not that a trifle venturesome? With infantry on one side, the outpost on the other, and a cavalry on a third, the only way would seem to be to retreat while we can by the fourth and last route."

"Lieutenant Curtis," said Will, quietly, "I am captain of this company."

"Very well."

"As captain of the company, I am bound to obey the orders of my superior."

"That is military law, sir."

"Certainly. You know well what my orders were. We were to cross Cedar Run and attack the outpost."

"That is literally true. But don't you think that you are expected to use judgment? If the outpost is suddenly augmented by an overwhelming force, do you think that General Jackson expects you to attack?"

Will smiled and replied:

"Military orders call for literal obedience. General Jackson would not have given me these orders to attack the outpost without reason. He knew well what the dangers were. He knew well that I would obey strictly."

There was silence for a moment.

All knew well enough that the point taken by the young captain was a true one. It was plain that he meant to stand by his orders.

"You see," he said, "it is not ours to reason why. We must go on. For aught we know, General Jackson has a motive, which may lead to dealing to the enemy a hard blow, and we may be the means."

"Captain Prentiss is right," said Malcolm Curtis.

"Enough!" cried Fred Randolph. "Fall in, boys! By the right flank——"

"Wait!" said Will, quickly. "I want to say right here, that no man shall cross that run with me unwillingly. If there are any among you who prefer not to do so, let them step out here, and they shall remain behind."

Not one of the Grays stepped out. The result was that in a few moments all were on their way across the run.

Will Prentiss knew well enough the deadly risk he was taking. He knew that he would be almost literally surrounded by the foe.

But, so great was his faith in General Jackson's judgment and his power to come to his assistance that he was determined to carry out his orders.

The Grays forded the stream and ascended the opposite side of the run. In due time they reached the opposite eminence.

Here for a moment Will called a halt.

Joe Spotswood now came forward as guide. The orderly-sergeant could lead the way to the outpost with ease.

So, in a few moments the little company was again on its way. They advanced through the dense growth of cedars.

It was not long before Spotswood came to a halt, and said:

"Yonder is the stone house. Just sight over that stump and you will see it."

Will went forward, and now saw the stone structure not two hundred yards away. Trenches could be seen about the place. There was every evidence that the place was carelessly defended.

The reason for this, apparently, was that the defenders of the outpost expected no attack, as they were so far from the advance guard of both armies.

This convinced Will Prentiss that Jackson was making some movement, and that this outpost was embraced in it.

Will carefully studied the situation.

He decided upon an immediate attack. With quick, low-toned orders he deployed the Grays and ordered the advance.

On went the gray line, so silently and so swiftly that they were in the outer line of defences before the foe dreamed of it.

Then the alarm was given.

The Union soldiers ran to the trenches, only to be met by the sweeping volleys of the Grays. The charge was a desperate one.

Although the Union defenders far outnumbered the Grays, they were unable to resist the unexpected attack. Over the breastworks swept the Confederate boy.

The result was that the Blues were driven into the stone house, and here, also, a desperate fight followed.

But Joe Spotswood led a party through a rear window, and the Union defenders, seeing that it was folly to resist further, threw down their arms.

Over one hundred were made prisoners. Many escaped, and a score had been killed. It was a dashing victory for the Grays.

They made the air ring with their cheers. But now new problems confronted them.

They had a large number of prisoners, and knew not what to do with them. As the Union captain offered to accept a parole, Will decided to take it.

So the entire Union line of prisoners, over one hundred of them, marched out without their arms, having taken the oath that they would return to their farms and fight the Confederacy no more.

How many of them broke their parole was never known. But it was the only course the Grays could pursue.

CHAPTER XIII.

PRISONERS.

Immediately upon capturing the Union outpost Will Prentiss had sent scouts to the run, to make sure that the sound of the conflict had not attracted the large body of infantry moving up the other side.

These scouts presently returned with a startling report. This was that the infantry was fording the stream.

Will set his lips, and his eyes flashed.

"They are coming over after us," said Malcolm Curtis, in a matter-of-fact tone. "We must give them a hot reception."

"That we shall," said Will, coolly.

So the Grays established themselves in the trenches to wait for the foe. They knew that they would be outnumbered twenty to one.

That they could not hope to hold forth against such odds was certain.

But this did not dampen their courage. The boy captain walked through the trenches speaking words of encouragement.

"Jackson won't see us wiped out," he said. "Keep up your grit. We will pull out in the end."

Of course this was encouraging to the boys. Their faith in Jackson was unbounded.

And suddenly, as they waited in the trenches, they heard a bugle call.

For a moment all looked eagerly to see Jackson's troopers coming through the trees. But they were doomed to disappointment.

Uniforms of blue flashed among the trees, and they saw that it was Colonel Peabody and his cavalry.

The cavalry dismounted and opened fire. The Grays answered, and for a time the battle was hot.

But then a cheer was heard on the other side, and lines of infantry came charging through the trees.

Will Prentiss saw that they could not hope to hold the trenches. So he gave orders to the boys to fall back into the stone house.

The foe had no artillery. The stone walls of the house were impervious to musketry. It might be possible to hold out there for a long time.

But, just as this move was being executed, with a wild hurrah the Union cavalry carried the inner line of trenches.

Bruised and bleeding, the little company of Grays was overpowered. Annihilation would have ensued.

Will Prentiss was brave to a fault. He was personally willing to give up his life in battle.

But he could see nothing to be gained by resistance against such odds. So he hastily tied his handkerchief to a ramrod and leaped upon the breastworks.

The signal was seen and respected. The fighting ceased. Colonel Peabody, of the cavalry, came forward and said: "Captain, do you surrender?"

"I am compelled to," replied Will. "I ask for the honors of war."

"We can only recognize you as prisoners of war subject to exchange."

"I am compelled to accept your terms."

It was a bitter moment for Will Prentiss. He had been confident that at the last moment Jackson would turn up to the rescue.

But the worst had come.

They had captured the outpost and obeyed orders. But, in turn, they had been absolutely overwhelmed and captured.

The Grays laid down their muskets and filed out of their entrenchments. Will Prentiss saw sadly that their ranks had been thinned. His heart was quite full.

He yielded up his sword with bowed head. The Union colonel, who seemed to be a fair-minded man, said, courteously:

"It is no disgrace, captain. The bravest of men have done the same thing."

"Your words are courteous and kind," said Will. "But I regret that I can no longer fight for my country."

"Don't say that. You may be exchanged at any time."

"Ah, but the stigma cannot be removed. By the way, colonel," with sudden thought, "there is a young woman in this company, whom I specially commend to your courteous care. She is the daughter of a brave Northern officer who died in our lines."

"Ah, I recall that," replied the colonel. "She disobeyed her guardian and ran away."

"Her guardian?"

"Yes, an honest old farmer who has assisted us as scout and guide. His name, I believe, is Hodgkins."

Will staggered back.

"Hodgkins! My soul! You have not given her up to him?"

"He took her away with him but a few moments ago. She resisted stoutly, I tell you; but the old fellow carried his point."

"My soul! That is a crime!" cried Will, excitedly. "That man is a murderer! His purpose is murderous! He will kill her! He has hunted her down for that purpose. If you are a man of honor—if you are human, send your men after him. Save that young woman's life!"

Peabody stared at Will in amazement.

"Is what you say true?"

"It is! I swear it!"

"But—he is a harmless old farmer."

"My soul! Will you not believe me? I rescued her

from his clutches. He is a murderer, I tell you. Her life will be on your head."

Still the Union colonel was incredulous.

"I cannot believe it!" he said.

"Look at me!" cried Will, frantically. "Do I look like a man who trifles? Don't you think I am in earnest? You have my sacred oath. She must be saved!"

Will Prentiss was beside himself. The Union colonel was at last impressed.

"I promised him he should have the girl back," he said. "How can I break my word?"

"Break your word? A paltry thing! Break your word a thousand times to save a human life."

"Yes—if I was sure—"

"God forbid that I should lie to you!" cried Will. "Save that young girl! Save her!"

Peabody turned and called to a lieutenant.

"Harris," he said, "did the old farmer take his niece away?"

"Yes," replied the lieutenant. "On my word, colonel, she's the prettiest girl I ever saw. She fought so hard I almost wanted to be her champion."

"Do you know which way they have gone?"

"No, but I think I could find out."

"Do so at once. Bring the old man and the girl back here. Don't let them escape. Go at once!"

Harris sprang away to do his bidding. Will Prentiss, feeling weak in the knees, sank down for recuperation.

It was a horrible, heartsickening thought to him that the pure, sweet girl had gone into the clutches of this man-monster, for such Will regarded him.

But the boy captain for the nonce was powerless. He was a captive in the Union lines. It was a discouraging reflection.

Never in his life had Will Prentiss been nearer to giving up in despair. The hard hand of fate seemed against him.

Just at that moment Malcolm Curtis approached him. His face was white and set.

"Prentiss," he said, rigidly, "Miss Clair has been given up to the human hyena, Hodgkins."

"So I have been informed," said Will. "It is indeed horrible."

"Do you think he will kill her?"

"He has sworn to take her life."

"Something must be done."

"Colonel Peabody has sent men to overtake him."

"Do you think that they will succeed?"

"I cannot say. I hope so."

"I do not believe they will. Prentiss, I am going to do a desperate thing. I am going to run the guard. I may be shot, but if I escape I will rescue Miss Clair. I might add—" the young lieutenant's voice trembled. "I might add that life without her would be void."

Will Prentiss looked at Curtis in surprise. He read more in his face than could have been expressed in words.

"I think I understand," he said. "You care for her."

"Yes. More than for life itself."

"I congratulate you. Do you think your regard is reciprocated?"

"I think she cares for me."

"You are certainly fortunate. I wish you great success and happiness. But I advise you not to risk running the guard. I think that Peabody's men will bring her back."

"I cannot stand the suspense of waiting. I must act at once."

Young Curtis walked away. Will Prentiss could not believe that the young lieutenant was serious in his purpose to run the guard.

But after events proved that he was wrong. It was some while later that an outcry arose near the guard line.

One of the prisoners had made a desperate dash, had struck down the guard nearest him and sprung into the bushes like an antelope.

Instantly other guards rushed up, and a volley of bullets was sent after him. But whether any struck him or not could not be told.

At any rate, the pursuers returned some time later without him, which was good evidence that he must have succeeded in his purpose.

Will Prentiss experienced a thrill of joy, for he knew that the escaped prisoner was Malcolm Curtis.

He hoped the young lieutenant would succeed in his purpose of overtaking Hodgkins, though at heart he felt little hope.

Peabody's men had returned, unsuccessful in their efforts to capture Hodgkins. Will was not surprised at this.

Colonel Peabody approached the young captain, and said:

"I am very sorry about that young woman. If I had known the truth about this Hodgkins would not have escaped."

"I fear the worst," said Will. "However, all has been done that is possible."

"Yes," declared the Union general, "and I fear that our victory gained here will prove but transient."

"That is to be regretted by you, but hardly by us," said Will, with a smile. "I felt sure that General Jackson would come to our relief."

"Well, he must be doing so, for Confederate troops are already at the ford. If they cross we shall retreat, for we are not in a position to make effective resistance. I believe that the whole of Jackson's army is within an hour's march."

Will experienced a thrill of joy.

"Do you mean that?" he cried.

"I am well informed that such is the case. But that need hardly add to your hopes," said the colonel, with a smile. "We have no idea of giving up our prisoners. You are to be marched to the rear at once."

But, for all this, Will Prentiss was elated.

It was only the bearing out of his theory that General Jackson had sent the Grays to capture the outpost as the preliminary to some greater move.

What this was would soon be apparent. The conscious-

ness of having done his duty was sweet to Will Prentiss now.

He communicated this new and startling information to Fred Randolph.

The young lieutenant of the Grays was overwhelmed with joy.

"Hurrah!" he cried. "We're all right, Will. Peabody will never be able to get us to the rear. It is likely that he is even now surrounded, and will be captured in his turn."

"I hope it will be so. Ah, do you hear that?"

The sound of distant musketry came to the ears of the two boys.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE FUGITIVE NEGRO.

The sounds of musketry seemed to come from the direction of the ford. Presently lines of Union soldiers came running into camp.

Colonel Peabody lost no time.

He gave quick orders for the abandoning of the outpost and a retreat.

The prisoners were ordered out and to fall in to the rear. Quickly this order was obeyed.

The Union cavalry prepared to mount. The infantry was already on the march.

They passed from the woods into the highway. Behind them sounded the rapid volleys of the rearguard.

Down the highway they marched rapidly. But now a startling turn in affairs came up. Without warning, from the woods on their front, came a blaze of musketry.

Uniforms of gray were seen, solid ranks of the foe extending across the highway as far as they could see. Colonel Peabody halted in dismay.

The enemy were in front and rear. The situation was a desperate one.

To go to the right or left was to expose their lines to flank attacks. They could only go ahead or back.

There was no way of knowing the strength of the foe. But Peabody decided to make an effort to break his way through the opposing line in front.

So he rode forward, and gave the order to the infantry to charge.

They set their bayonets and proceeded to obey orders. Forward they went at the double-quick.

But they had proceeded but a short distance when they met a disastrous volley, which swept their front and shattered their ranks.

They were driven back in great confusion.

Peabody was aghast.

He now saw that the Confederates, in their turn, were coming to the charge. From the woods they came in overwhelming numbers.

The cavalry was now called up. But one dash resulted in the sweeping away of a third of their number.

It was all over.

Colonel Peabody was a brave man. But he was discreet as well.

He could not see his brave men go to utter destruction in such a manner. So he rode forward and gave the order to cease firing.

A colonel from the Confederate ranks rode forward to receive the surrender. Then the truth became known.

More than half of Jackson's whole division had swung around to this point and were about to outflank Pope. The Confederate general and his staff were but a short distance away.

Of course Will Prentiss and his Grays were liberated. The brigadier-general, whose name was Foster, greeted Will warmly, and said:

"General Jackson has done nothing but inquire about you. He was afraid you were wiped out."

"I shall report to General Jackson at once."

"I would do so, by all means. He will be glad to see you."

As soon as possible Will left the Grays by the roadside and went in quest of the commanding general.

Stonewall Jackson, the pride of the South, was with his staff a few hundred yards away. He was dismounted and studying the field with his glass.

He turned his head and caught sight of Will Prentiss. At once he gave a great cry:

"Prentiss," he cried, "I am glad to see you. You carried out my orders."

"I did, sir," replied Will, "though we were obliged later to surrender."

"I expected that. Did you think I intended to sacrifice you?"

"We were ready for that, sir," replied Will.

The general's eyes kindled.

"You have done well," he said. "I want to tell you that we have the enemy on the run. The success of the present movement is due to the clever way in which you carried out my orders."

Will Prentiss felt giddy.

"That is very gratifying to me, sir," he said. "I can assure you of that."

"You have done well, Prentiss; you and your Grays are entitled to much praise. Now, I want you to keep right along as you have in the past. Keep an eye out for the guerillas. If you catch Watson I want you to hang him."

"All right, sir," replied Will, saluting. "I shall obey your orders."

The young captain went back to his comrades in a very happy frame of mind. When he reported the interview to Fred Randolph the young lieutenant said:

"We can congratulate ourselves heartily, Will. But now that we have received such general orders to hunt down the guerillas, why can we not take the trail of Watson and his gang?"

"Just what we will do," declared the young captain.

"We will be almost sure to run across him on the outskirts of the army. I think if we went to the rear and laid low we would be apt to strike him."

"We will do so!" declared Will. "Give the order at once."

The Grays were thus again detached from the main army. But it was the sort of work they liked.

It was not long before they were making their way back to the ford. They saw no sign of the enemy and, crossing, continued to march back toward Cedar Run.

The day was now rapidly drawing to a close. The Grays had reached forks in the highway, and were undecided which way to go, when a startling thing happened.

Shots were heard far off in the woods. There was a crashing in the underbrush, and then into the highway bounded a half clad negro.

He was torn and bleeding, and as frightened as ever a black man was. At sight of the Grays he halted.

One moment he hesitated; then he ran toward them with loud cries of supplication. At the same moment from the woods behind him there bounded two huge bloodhounds.

"A runaway!" cried Fred Randolph. "The dogs will kill him."

"No, they won't!" cried Will, drawing a revolver. "I am going to save that negro."

The young captain fired, and the first dog leaped in the air and rolled over in the dust. The second dog was now almost upon the negro.

"Oh, sabe me, massa! Don' let dem git dis po' niggah!" shouted the black man.

Once again Will fired. He missed, but several of the Grays fired and the dog dropped.

The next moment the negro was by Will's stirrup and clinging to it in piteous terror. Out of the woods rode half a dozen men.

One of them was a low-browed fellow. He carried a cruel whip in his hand.

All drew rein' at sight of the Grays. The leader, the one with the whip, saw the two dogs lying in the dust, and his face darkened.

He at once reined his horse toward Will Prentiss and, glaring at him, cried:

"Did you shoot my dogs?"

"I shot one of them," replied Will, coggly.

"Thunder! What right had ye to do that?"

"To save this negro's life. They would have killed him otherwise."

"Oho! Who are ye?"

"I am Will Prentiss, of Richmond. Who are you?"

"I am Lew Cass, of Cedar Hill. That nigger belongs to me. He tried to run away and git into the Union lines. He's my property, and if the dogs had killed him it was my loss, not yours. You had no right to kill my dogs."

"I killed them to save this negro's life," said Will. "He may be your property, and perhaps the law gives you the right to hunt him down with dogs, but you have no moral right to kill him."

"Are you a Confederate?"

"I am."

"Then you're a traitor."

"No, I'm not," replied Will. "I'm a loyal Southerner, and doing more for the cause than you. But my family

treats their bound servants in a humane manner. It is just such fellows as you that gives our cause a bad repute."

"Probably you are of a little better blood than the rest of us," sneered Cass.

"I should hope that I had better breeding than you appear to have," said Will.

"Mebbe you think that uniform gives you the right to insult civilians?"

"If you had the interests of the South at heart you would be wearing a uniform yourself."

"Well, that's my pleasure."

"I allow that."

"I want ter know what you're goin' ter do ter make up for killing my dogs."

"Absolutely nothing."

The fellow glared at Will in a wolfish way. He was evidently very angry.

But Will Prentiss knew well how to deal with fellows of his type.

"I'll report you for this!" snarled Cass. "You have no right to kill my dogs. I'll let Jackson know about this."

"I hope you will. I wouldn't give a penny for all the sympathy you'll get."

"You kin talk now, with all your men at your back."

"That does not make me any bolder," said Will. "If I stood here alone I would say the same thing to you."

Cass was black with wrath. But he saw that he was helpless. With an angry snarl, he said:

"Come here, nigger! When I git you home I'll take the worth of them dogs out of your hide."

"No, you won't," said Will, coolly.

"Eh? You can't take my nigger from me."

"You must swear that you won't hurt him. If you don't I'll turn him into the woods, to go just where he wishes."

"Oh, massa, don't let him hab me," pleaded the black man. "I ain't his property anyway. I belong to old Marse Wentworth. He jest make me go wif him."

Will's eyes flashed.

"Oh, I see," he said. "You don't own him, anyway, Cass."

"That's a lie!" howled the brute. "Turn that nigger over to me, or I'll pull ye out of yer saddle an' horsewhip ye afore yer men."

"Will you?" said Will, dismounting. "Get off your horse and I'll give you the chance. You're nothing but a bully and a coward."

Cass did not comply. There was a rattling sound of bayonets among the Grays. It was an ominous sound.

"Will ye give me thet nigger?" he demanded.

"Cuffy," said Will, turning to the black man, "are you telling me the truth when you say that you don't belong to this man?"

"Fo' de Lord, massa, I tell yo' de troof. I is old Marse Wentworth's nigger, an' I done go back to him."

"Then cut out for the woods, lively!"

The negro darted away. In an instant Cass started after him. But Will, in a ringing voice, shouted:

"Halt! Take a step after him, and I will order my men to fire upon you!"

The Grays already had their muskets aimed at the gang. Cass drew rein and, glaring at Will, cried:

"You'll pay for this! I'm not done with you! I'll even the score."

Then, turning his horse, he rode away, followed by his men. They vanished around a bend in the road. Fred Randolph now came forward, and said:

"Captain Prentiss, Leslie, the scout, has just come up and has important news for you."

Will turned and saw the scout, who saluted, and said:

"Captain Prentiss, I have located Watson and his gang."

CHAPTER XV.

WHICH IS THE LAST.

It is hardly necessary to say that the scout's declaration was one of interest to Will Prentiss.

The boy captain was exceedingly glad to locate Watson and his gang again.

This time he would endeavor to destroy them. So he said:

"Leslie, I am glad to hear that. Where is the scoundrel?"

"Not a mile from here, sir, in a clearing in the swamp. I can lead you to the place now if you wish."

"Let us lose no time," said Will. "Forward, Grays!"

With the scout in the lead, the little company of boy soldiers now went on. A little ways further on they came into a road which led into the swamp.

As the day was drawing to a close, the light was getting dim. But they kept on until there came a break in the trees.

Here Leslie halted, and said:

"Their picket guard is only fifty yards away. I have their countersign. Let me have a couple of men, and I will go up and see that he is removed."

"I will go with you," said Will. "Also, I will take Joe Spotswood."

The three approached the picket in the gloom. He could not distinguish the color of their uniforms, but he sent out a challenge:

"Halt! Who goes there?"

Leslie advanced and gave the countersign.

"I have brought in a couple of spies," he said. "They have news for Watson."

"Pass the guard," said the sentry. Leslie stepped back and motioned Joe and Will to precede him.

The sentry turned to look at the others. As he did so Leslie's right arm swung out like lightning.

The blow caught the picket back of the ear. Without a groan he fell senseless to the ground.

"Quick!" whispered the scout. "Bind and gag him!"

This was quickly done. Then he was left to come to as he might. The three daring invaders passed on.

Creeping up in the undergrowth they saw a circle of camp

fires. One glance was enough to reveal a thrilling state of affairs.

Numbers of the guerillas were seen grouped about the circle. A couple of white canvas-covered wagons were seen in the background.

Tied to the rear wheel of one of these was a young Confederate officer.

One glance was enough for Will and his companions. He was recognized as Malcolm Curtis.

Young Curtis was wounded, for blood stained his features and his uniform. But he was cool and defiant.

The three men in the undergrowth saw this. They very soon saw and heard more which was very comprehensive.

Watson, the guerilla, with dark features contorted with brutal rage, stood near to the prisoner. Before him were half a dozen lawless looking men.

They were no others than Lew Cass and his gang. To see them here in the camp of the Union guerillas was, it may truly be said, a surprise to Will and his companions.

"Wall," growled Watson, "if what you'uns say is true, we'll be durned glad ter turn out an' bag ther game. If I ever git my hands on that young Captain Prentiss agin I'll hang him."

"It's yer chance," said Cass. "We'll stand in an' help ye, be sure."

"But ye say he has a full company."

"Yas."

"Wall, I reckon he might be too strong for me. I've only fifty men here. All ther rest of ther boys are over ter Cedar Run."

"Wall, we don't keer nothin' about ther company. We only want to git Prentiss," said Cass.

"I see; ye wanter square ther account with him."

"That's jest it!"

"Wall, I guess we kin do it. But, first off, we've got ter deal with this 'ere obstinate young sarpint hyar."

Watson turned to Curtis savagely.

"Now, I know ye shot Hodgkins an' got ther gal," he said. "But I want ye ter turn her over to me, or I'll hang ye right now. Come, give her up."

"You might as well save time," said Curtis, coolly. "I would die ten thousand deaths before I would come to your terms."

"Then ye refuse?"

"I do."

"What's ther game?" asked Cass. "What do ye want of ther gal?"

"I've taken a fancy to her, and I'm goin' ter marry her," said Watson. "Out with it, ye pup! Last chance."

"Never!"

"Die, then, confound ye! Ho, there, Frisbie! Bring out a rope. String this bantam up. P'raps a little strangling will change his mind."

Will Prentiss turned and placed a hand on Joe Spotswood's arm.

"Go back, Joe," he whispered. "Bring the Grays up silently."

Spotswood dropped back instantly.

The guerillas quickly cut the bonds of Curtis and led him forward. A noose was ready to be put about his neck, when Will saw the bayonets of the Grays right behind him.

At once he shouted:

"Hold! Hands up and surrender, or you are all dead men!"

Watson, the guerilla, gave a yell and, as the line of Grays surged into view, he made a desperate dash to escape. The other guerillas did the same.

But a volley brought many of them down. Joe Spotswood overtook Watson and hurled him to the ground. He was quickly made a prisoner.

The guerilla camp was quickly in the hands of the Grays. Will Prentiss was fairly embraced by Curtis, who cried:

"Thank Heaven, my prayers were answered. All is over. Hodgkins is dead. I had to kill him to save Mabel. It was a fight to the death, but he will never do her harm now. Whatever the mystery of his intense hatred for Mabel was will now never be known."

"And she?" asked Will. "What has become of her?"

"She is safe at the home of the Van Courts, five miles from here," replied Curtis. "They will care for her until she can return north. I left her there, and was on my way back to report for duty when captured by Watson."

"You have done well, Curtis."

The young lieutenant's eyes glistened.

"Yes, I think I have," he said; "and I am the happiest man on earth."

"Ah!"

"She has told me that she cares for me, and when the war is over—"

"God give you happiness," said Will Prentiss, fervently. "We all shall speed the day when the war shall be ended."

What followed was but logical sequence. Will Prentiss did not execute the guerilla Watson.

He chose to let the military court pass upon this case. Watson was later sentenced to death, after a fair trial.

General Jackson approved heartily of all that Will Prentiss and his Grays had done. The Confederate army pursued its way northward, and the Virginia Grays went with it to greater deeds and victories.

THE END.

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